Shinobi of the Sand (Fish's Version - 2024)
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Shinobi of the Sand (Fish's Version - 2024)

by Goldfishlover73

Summary

Sakura and her newborn flee a waiting death in Konoha to find refuge in Suna. Leaving behind her life, her friends and her love isn't easy, especially when her son goes back for the truth.

Notes

Hello!
Welcome, to Shinobi of the Sand. Fish's version!

This story has always held a special place in my heart. It has been a story I've thought back on fondly over the years. It's a story that is heavily referenced in a lot of my other works (even more than I realized) and it was written at a very pivotal moment in my life. Even without knowing it needed revision, I always wanted to come back to it and to read it with fresh eyes.
And how fresh they were.
I remembered 0% of this story. From my memories and rereading this story over the last three months the only thing I properly remembered was who Obito was. It was like reading a whole new story.
Spoilers: the ending is a banger.
And...not quiet what *you* remember as well.

This is Fish's version. Where Fish has come and polished it to make it shine. This isn't a rewrite, but there is more to it than you remember. And less.
NOTE: **Again, this is not a rewrite**. This is not what I did with Misadventures! This was a mass revision. The story, the plot, the characters are all the same. If you have read this before and you didn't like it, well, you're probably still not going to like it. It is the same story.

I didn't rewrite it, but I have rounded it out. Motivations and characters are explored a little more. Small details were changed. and I removed the Epilogue.

WITH ALL THAT NONSENSE BEING SAID. BEFORE READING PLEASE READ THIS!

-This story was written before the Pein Arc. I did not change anything to match how Naruto ended. Please keep that in mind when reading.
-Please see above.

I was going to make this big long list of things, but I've changed my mind. There are tags in 2024! Read those.

-Also, at one point when you're reading this and you think to yourself, 'are they gay?' the answer is yes. Because I thought the same thing when I read this. And then I remembered that I wrote it. They are whatever I want them to be.

It was so much fun to reread and to revise and to fall in love with all over again. I'm glad I sat down and did this. More so than I could have imagined. I hope you enjoy it too.

See the end of the work for more notes

Prolouge

Sakura's legs became wobbly as she stumbled over another root. She reached out wildly, nails digging into the bark of the large oak. Her legs wobbled. Her lungs burned. Her heart hammered in her chest. Her fingers slipped, her shoulder coming to rest heavily on the tree trunk as she struggled to get her breathing under control. She looked behind her, her eyes straining as much as her ears in the darkness of the quiet forest. Panic rose in her throat like vomit as her heart tried to leap through her throat. She willed her body to calm. *There is no need to panic. No one is going to know I'm gone for hours.*

She nodded to herself, pulling herself upright as Tsunade's words echoed in her head.

"Do not overexert yourself in your condition. You must go at a steady pace or you will not make it.

This will all be for nothing. This isn't just about you." Sakura pushed herself off the tree, inhaling deeply as she straightened. She checked herself; besides the pain she had before she left Konoha and her matching exhaustion, she was fine. Nothing had gotten worse.

She exhaled again, looking back and carefully adjusting the bundle on her back as she resumed, walking west with purpose.

Tsunade's voice in her mind soothed her nerves. " *Shizune is sending word now, the Kazekage will be expecting you. You must go now; only stop when you absolutely must. You cannot afford to lose time.*

"Once he finds out-

"Not even Kakashi will be able to help you."

Sakura shivered at the thought of what would happen once *he* found out. Found out what she had done. Where she was going.

Who she was with.

She forced herself to continue walking and to not run. She had been running for the better part of the night and needed to conserve her energy until she reached safety.

She hoped she could find it.

She left Konoha six hours ago, stopping every few hours when absolutely necessary, making her journey feel like days. Exhaustion and paranoia had her constantly checking over her shoulder, fearing Shishou wouldn't be able to stall *him* long enough for her to make it to Wind.

He's not stupid, she chanted in her mind, swallowing thickly, *he'll know something is off.* She tensed at a soft noise. A low rustle to her left made her freeze in her tracks.

She looked behind her into the trees.

Into her bundle.

She exhaled slowly, drawing a kunai. Her ears strained as she carefully moved forward, keeping her feet as light as possible. She traveled slowly, the sound growing as the trees thinned. The sound grew louder, changing from a rustling to a roaring. Her heart soared as she moved faster, her feet cracking branches and leaves underfoot as she broke through the trees into the morning sun. She almost cried at the sight of two grand statues staring at each other in the distance.

She blinked quickly, swallowing the lump in her throat. She shifted the bundle on her pack. “The Valley of the End…” Her smile hurt. “We made it...” She laughed as she rushed carefully to the shoreline, stumbling into a crouch as she cupped her hands, and dunked them into the cool water. As she brought it to her lips, drinking heavily, she felt the cool liquid move down her throat, through her chest. She sighed deeply before taking more mouthfuls.

She was almost there, almost free. *Tsunade said to rest here, and travel through the night to Suna...It will be another two days until I reach the village...I wonder -*

She stopped her thought. There was no wondering. She *had* to make it.

She had no other option.

Sakura stood, exhaling deeply as she searched the rock face across the valley. There had to be some kind of cave or outcropping they could take refuge in for a few hours. Just long enough for her to recover *something* .

She saw a small opening across the lake about ten feet above the water and smiled softly, looking over her shoulder. “It’s a bit obvious,

but...it will have to do." She looked behind her into the trees one last time before quickly dashing across the water. She crouched as they entered the small cave, walking far enough in where it was hard for her to see.

He wouldn't have a problem… she shook her head, swallowing thickly before carefully removing her bundle. She shifted, moving the heavy material as her heart lurched in her chest. She felt tears prick her eyes as she sank to the ground. She let out a choked sob as she collapsed to the rocky ground, her back hitting the wall of the cave hard as she looked down at the tiny baby boy that lay snuggled in the blankets, sound asleep.

She swallowed her cries as she carefully unraveled the blankets. "Come here, Obito-kun." She whispered, her fingers brushing against his unbelievably soft skin. Her breath became ragged. "Mama is so sorry about all of this Obito-kun." She swallowed the strain down as she carefully held her baby against her chest. He shifted, his dark eyes widening as he woke. She ran the back of her finger over his soft cheek.

He was perfect.

"Mama really screwed up." she choked, as the baby grabbed the front of her shirt. She quickly shifted, adjusting her shirt as instinct for both of them took over. "I wish...I wish it didn't have to be this way," she told him this every day, even before they escaped Konoha. She rocked him softly, leaning her head against the rock. "But if this is the life we must live, running from Sasuke, then that is what we must do." Her nails softly rain through the small tuft of silver on his head, smiling. "I just wish that your father could have been able to meet you..." she leaned down and pressed her lips to his forehead. Obito-kun made a small noise against her, snuggling into her breast.

She sighed, pulling the baby as close as she could. "One day, Mama promises. We'll all be together."

She exhaled deeply, letting the sound of Obito and the river lull her into a light rest. She knew that she wouldn't sleep-sleep would not come until they were both safe in Suna, but the rest was welcome.

Sasuke's Return

Two Years Previous

Sakura sighed, smiling softly to herself as she headed towards the hospital lobby. It had been a long day, even longer than expected after Tsunade asked her to step in for one of the doctor's who called in sick.

Not like she was actually *asked* . Sometimes Sakura really hated being the student to the head doctor.

Sakura entered the main hallway, stepping aside as six wide eyed nurses ran past her. Sakura side stepped as one almost knocked into her.

He spun on his heel, almost toppling over as he bowed. "So-sorry, Haruno-sensei!"

Sakura thought to say something, but one look at the boy's wide shining eyes made her second guess it. Plus, it had been a long day. She waved him off and continued her trek out of the hospital.

"I'm sorry, again Haruno-sama," the boy's insistent voice made her pause, turning back to him. He was a head taller than her, his build medium with short honey brown hair that matched his eyes. He seemed to recover slightly, standing tall. He stood on his toes before rocking back on his heels. "It's just-just that Naruto-sama has returned."

Sakura froze, her heart jumping in her chest. She couldn't help the smile that tugged on her lips. "Really." Her voice was low.

He grinned brightly, nodded frantically, "Just a minute ago!"

And no one told me? "Is he okay?" she turned on her heel, stalking past him after the other nurses.

The boy was at her heels. "Ah, yes! He is doing better than the other one. The other guy was at the brink of death with a giant hole in his chest. Only Tsunade-sama would have been able to heal him like that…" The boy let out a nervous laugh, "And you too, Sakura-sensei!"

Sakura eyed him warily, turning down a hall that was full of excited whispers. Nurses and doctors parted as she moved towards the room at the end of the hall. “Naruto’s mission was a B-Rank escort. He was not supposed to bring back anyone.” He had complained enough about it before he left.

“He didn’t finish his mission.” Sakura paused outside the door, turning to look at the boy, flabbergasted. He smirked. “And he didn’t bring back just *anyone,* Sakura-sensei. After all, Uchiha Sasuke is definitely not just anybody.” Sakura felt all the air rush from her lungs as everything fell away.

Sasuke?

The boy let out a yelp as Sakura’s hand snaked out and grabbed him. She yanked him down to her eye level. “Are you sure? You better not be lying to me-”

The boy’s eyes widened and shook his head. “No, no I swear!”

Sakura let go as she looked at the door with a different perspective. *He's back? Sasuke's back?* Sakura felt eerily calm as the door swung open in slow motion. She felt relief wash over her at the sight of orange. The nurse was forgotten as she threw her arms around Naruto.

“Eh! I should go on B-Ranks more often!” Naruto laughed, pulling her off the ground.

She snorted, “Idiot.” Her feet touched back down on the floor and she took a step back. His eyes, usually bright and playful, had a serious edge to them. He looked into the room, his smile dampening. She took a step back, looking into the small hospital room. Three medic-nins and Tsunade huddle around the bed. Sakura’s heart beat heavily in her chest as she watched the nurses. She couldn’t see who was in the bed, wouldn’t believe it until she saw with her own two eyes.

And then one of the nurses moved.

Sakura couldn’t breathe.

The first thing she noticed was his hair, dark against the white sheets. It was longer than it had been the last time she’d seen him, years ago. He had deep lines under his eyes, no doubt from excessive Sharingan use. Sakura gaped, struggling to breathe.

“Sasuke-kun…” She couldn’t believe it.

Naruto had done it. He’d brought him back.

"I guess I went a little overboard eh?" Naruto whispered. She tore her eyes away from Sasuke, ignoring the rock that formed in her stomach as she focused on Naruto. He looked at her sheepishly, a tinge of pink on his cheeks.

She forced a grin. "You didn’t say you’d bring him back in one piece.” She reached out and grabbed Naruto’s arm. It was hot. Comforting.

He shrugged, leaning into her touch as a playful smirk dancing across his face. His teeth were slightly elongated. She noticed the scars on his long, tan, lean face seemed more prominent; his blond hair almost blocked his bright blue eyes that flickered red. She thought she should feel scared as he pulled his hot arm out of her grasp, wrapping it around her shoulder. "I told you I'd bring him back, even if I have to bring him screaming and kicking."

"Or comatose.” He hummed. She leaned into him. “Returning a favor?" Her mind went back to one of her first nights in the hospital, when she sat by his side after Sasuke had left him at the Valley of the End for dead.

She felt him kiss the top of her head. "Perhaps."

"You okay?" she turned slightly, pressing her hand to his chest, green chakra flowing into his body.

He hummed, closing his eyes. "Better now." He mumbled.

She wasn’t sure if it was her chakra or Sasuke or both. She felt his body cool, his markings fade slightly. She smiled looking up at Naruto, "How does it feel? Finally having Sasuke back?"

He pulled away, brows furrowed, "I'm not sure. Not the way that I thought I would..." he mumbled softly. Peaking one of his bright blue eyes opened, he looked down at her lazily, "You?"

Sakura shrugged. “Same.”

"You two!" Sakura looked up to see Tsunade scowling at them. "Leave.”

Sakura thought better of asking Tsunade-shishou if she should stay

and help. She nodded, pulling Naruto out of the door frame, chakra still healing a minor wound.

As they walked down the hall she whispered, "Did you catch him by surprise?"

"A little. Listen, I know I promised you I'd bring him back for you-"

She felt the rock in her stomach grow, "Naruto-"

"But I didn't." He confessed. “I *needed* to do this. For *me* .” Sakura looked up at him; his face didn’t give away anything. “I know it's been *years* .” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don't expect things to be the same. I actually kind of expect them to remain how they are now.” He frowned, shrugging, “Just…with Sasuke here.”

Sakura closed her eyes and tried to think of what that looked like. She didn’t like how her mind was blank. It did nothing to calm her nerves.

She removed her hand from his chest, bringing it around his waist as they left the hospital. “Thank you, Naruto.”

As they passed the threshold of the hospital, Naruto transformed. She felt him physically relax as he almost danced away from her. “Ramen later?"

She put her hands on her hips. “Not *too* late. I have plans.”

Naruto wiggled his eyebrows. “Oh, oh, oh! Hot date, Sakura-chan?”

She scowled as she felt the heat rise to her face. She reached out and smacked him a little less than lightly in the stomach. “Shut up.”

“What do we have here?” Naruto and Sakura stopped, turning at the voice, Sakura felt everything fade to warmth at the deep baritone. “Don't we look all comfortable.” Sakura couldn’t help the smile as her chest warmed. “Why don’t you hold *me* that close, Naruto?”

“Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto cheered, pulling away from Sakura. “Did ya hear!? Did ya hear!?”

Kakashi nodded, patting Naruto on the shoulder. “Congratulations.” Sakura watched as Kakashi’s eyes slid her. He gave her a small smile as Naruto went into a descriptive recount of the fight with Sasuke and his capture. Sakura found it odd how she didn’t care to hear it. She watched Kakashi’s unreadable face carefully as he listened with rapt

attention.

When Naruto finished, Kakashi was silent for a moment, deep in thought. “Well,” he sighed before saying what Sakura had been thinking, “It seemed… *easy* .”

Sakura was half expecting Naruto to argue, but instead he nodded, looked back to the hospital. “I know, ya know?” The blond whispered, looking back at Kakashi before finding Sakura’s gaze. "I think...I think he wanted to come back. But- but he couldn't just- *come back* , ya know?” Naruto looked back at the hospital. “He needed me to knock some sense into him.”

“And a rasengan.”

Naruto nodded. Sakura didn’t like this. When she had imagined Naruto dragging Sasuke back to the village, she had assumed they would all be excited and full of energy. Not looking back at the hospital forebodingly. “He wants something.” Naruto said softly. “I don’t know if it’s from me or the team or the village.

“But he came back with a purpose.”

“Probably,” Kakashi agreed. He shrugged. “Well, we won’t know until he wakes up, hm?”

Sakura nodded. She didn’t like this. She swallowed thickly as she looked between Naruto and Kakashi. “I wonder what will happen to him…If he wants something, he’ll have to answer for his actions first.”

“It will no doubt be up to the elders.” Kakashi grimaced. “He'll have to pay for his crimes somehow.” *Of course he would.* Abandoning the village and following the man who killed the Third Hokage isn’t something to be taken lightly. Kakashi inspected the hospital. “But since he's the last of the Uchiha, they certainly won't kill him…” Kakashi gave them one of his closed eyed smiles, “Only time will tell.”

Naruto nodded, physically swallowing. "Well, until Tsunade lets me back in, I guess I'll go find Hinata-chan. She wanted to-” Naruto froze “-to talk…about something. Very important.” He said lamely, shoved his hands in his pockets. His cheeks went pink. “We’re getting ramen later, you want to come, Kakashi-sensei?”

“How about a salad?”

“ *Kakashi-sensei!* ” Naruto groaned, but he grinned. He eyed Sakura, “Ramen later?”

She pointed at him. “Don’t forget! I have plans! It can’t be too late!”

"Guy hunting isn't plans, Sakura-chan!" Naruto chided.

"Tell Ino that." she groaned.

With a small wave, Naruto was off.

Sakura watched Naruto leave, acutely aware of Kakashi silently moving to stand next to her. She looked up at him, her heart fluttering as he gestured down the road. His hands were in his pockets, no doubt fingering the edges of his precious book as they walked in companionable silence towards the residential district. “You know,” Kakashi murmured, “with the way you two were hanging all over each other, you're going to get the rumor brigade started again.”

Sakura snorted, following behind him. “I doubt it. Remember what happened last time?”

Kakashi’s elbow brushed her arm, “Hinata tried to fight you in front of the Ramen stand?”

Sakura’s arm bumped his as they moved down her street. She almost felt like skipping, “Fight? You mean stutter me to death.” Kakashi hummed, nodding, “I think she really needs to work on her fighting skills if that's what you're calling it.”

“You did your fair amount of screaming too.” Kakashi countered.

Sakura huffed, “I did not scream!”

“Telling her ‘in your dreams.’” wasn’t helping your argument.” His voice pitched high at ‘in your dreams.’

She scowled.

“Perhaps not the best thing to say, since it *was* her nightmare.” Kakashi sighed, “Next time we train I'll teach you a water technique, so when she comes after you, you can drench her in water.” he ruffled her hair. She felt her anger building, "who knows, maybe Naruto will finally notice her giant-umph!” Kakashi doubled over as Sakura elbowed him hard in the stomach.

"Pervert."

“Sakura!” he gasped, staggering, “I'm…dying! Internal bleeding! Punctured spleen!” He fell to the ground dramatically.

Sakura watched him as he lay on the ground not moving. She blinked, looking around the empty street. “Kakashi-sensei,” she nudged him with her foot. “Kakashi, get up.” When he didn't respond she sighed loudly, rolling her eyes and kept walking. “You can stay dead, I'm going home.”

She continued her trek home, looking back only once to her now 'dead' ex sensei, before her mind became wrapped in the new developments.

Sasuke...

It had been months since she last thought of him, and even then it had been fleeting. Now that he was home, she wasn't sure what to think. Her whole life was different now from when he was last there. Though the life she had chosen was mainly because of him, she couldn't think of a life with him in it now. Her thoughts shifted to Naruto, who risked his life to bring the man back. How Naruto promised he didn't bring him back for her.

Sakura stopped in the street, looking back to where Kakashi had been laying in the street. The street was empty.

Sakura stared at the spot, her heart thumping in her stomach. *Does he know?*

“Know what?” Sakura yelped, stumbling back, falling ungracefully. Before she could hit the ground, a hand grabbed her arm, pulling her up.

She looked up at her rescuer. She scowled. “I thought you were dead.”

He smiled behind his mask. “The sound of a damsel in distress brought me back to life,” he whispered, looking into her eyes.

Sakura ignored him, pulling herself free. “I fell because you startled me.”

“A ninja should always be aware of her surroundings.” Sakura rolled her eyes, but said nothing as he followed her home.

It wasn't until they were both kicking off their shoes in her entry way, did Kakashi speak again. “Does he know what?”

“Who?” She walked down the hall towards her bedroom.

Kakashi was on her heels. “Whoever you were talking about?”

Sakura bit her lip. “Naruto,” she shedded her work clothes as she entered her bedroom. Kakashi didn’t follow her in. “Naruto told me he brought Sasuke home because it was something he had- *needed to do* . That he didn't bring him home for me...” Sakura trailed off, pulling her shirt over her head and tossing it in her hamper. She grabbed a clean shirt off her be and pulled it over her head. “So I asked myself, does he know?” Sakura turned. Kakashi was leaning against the doorframe, staring out the window, his eyes slightly glazed, far off in his own thoughts.

“Are you coming tonight?” she whispered. Her voice brought him back to this world. He took a few steps, closing the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around her, inhaling her scent, kissing her forehead. “I'll meet you at the bar after ramen.

“You two have fun.”

Sakura leaned into his chest, closing her eyes.

She was finally home.

III

Sakura shifted in her chair, and clutched her pounding head. *It has been a long day...*

After a night of Ramen, drinks and Kakashi, Naruto banged on her door at five-forty-five, dragging her to the hospital.

And here she sat, talking idly with Naruto for three hours until Kakashi showed up, giving Naruto a curt nod and Sakura's shoulder a gentle squeeze. Kakashi took his place near the window, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed as he watched Sasuke as if he would jump from his bed and make a run for it.

Naruto filled the silence with a retelling of his fight with Sasuke and his capture.

It wasn't until after noon that Sasuke’s eyes finally fluttered open.

They all sat in silence as Sasuke shifted and sat up in the bed, looking at the rest of Team Seven silently.

And as the shift change approached, Sakura still sat in her stuffy chair, rubbing her temples as she tried not to lose her cool as the room was filled with the same heavy silence. Kakashi had long since pulled out his book, Naruto gaped at Sasuke while Sasuke looking down at his hands. Sakura tried to look anywhere but at Sasuke. She ended up watching Kakashi, envy boiling under her skin as he flipped the page of his orange book, seemingly oblivious to the awkward silence that was in the tiny room. After a while, she turned her gaze back to Naruto and Sasuke, who now sat staring at each other, still not saying anything.

When the door banged open, Sakura could help but thank the gods as Tsunade burst into the room.

Kakashi didn't even bother looking up from his book.

Tsunade put her hands on her hips, glaring, "Get the hell out! I have work to do."

Sakura jumped out of her chair, thankful for the order. Kakashi trailed behind her as Tsunade shoved Naruto out of the room.

"Well, that was productive." Kakashi mused, turning a page.

"He's still tired." Naruto whispered, before pushing ahead, leading them out of the hospital. "Once he's regained his strength…" Naruto grinned.

They were silent exiting the hospital.

"What are you plans for the rest of the day Naruto?" Kakashi deposited his book in its pouch.

Naruto grinned. "It's a secret," he sang.

Kakashi hummed, nodding. "Banging your girlfriend isn't a secret. Especially for you. Neji says he can hear her scream your name from his-"

"I'm not-no-not banging my girlfriend !" he hissed, eyes wide. Sakura covered her mouth, muffling the giggles in her chest. Naruto shook his head. "She-she will be there but-but there is no- *banging* !" his face turned beet red.

Kakashi sighed, disappointed, "Well, whatever you kids are calling it these days, don't let us keep you." Kakashi waved him off, pulling his

book out once again.

Naruto groaned again, waving them off before taking off towards his apartment.

“Ah! Young love!” Kakashi sighed wistfully before turning a page in his book. Sakura quickly fell into step next to him and they started to walk. She looked up at the sky.

No matter how much she tried to shake this feeling... This pressure in her chest...almost a feeling of *dread* ... She couldn't.

I should be happy. Sasuke’s back. Naruto did what he had to do and everything should go back to normal.

She blinked rapidly. *But...will it really go back to normal. What is normal?* She lowered her head, looking at Kakashi. His nose was buried deep in his book, but she knew he wasn't reading. Sakura's fingers twitched. *Isn’t* this *normal?*

“Ryo for your thoughts.” Kakashi didn't lift his head, but his back straightened slightly, something Sakura learned over the years meant you had his full, undivided attention.

She sighed. “I don’t know. Do you get this...foreboding feeling? I’ve had it since yesterday. I can’t get rid of it.”

“Hmm.” Kakashi placed the book in his pocket, and followed a side street to his left.

To Kakashi’s house we go.

“What do you think is going to happen with Sasuke? He's going to be released from the hospital soon. Is he going to be arrested and told to live the rest of his life in a jail cell?”

“I doubt he’d come back for that.”

“Exactly.” Sakura felt the back of Kakashi’s hand brush hers, making her stomach explode in butterflies. “He must be expecting something else.”

“He *is* the last Uchiha. I bet he’s going to bargain with that.”

“To keep the bloodline going?” Sakura looked up to Kakashi who gave her an eye crinkle.

“Looks like Naruto’s not going to be the only one who’s going to be getting some.”

Sakura rolled her eyes, smacking him lightly. “He might.” Kakashi groaned, wrapping an arm around Sakura before pulling her up the stairs to his apartment.

“I think Naruto’s going to become Hokage soon.” He whispered in her ear as he fished his keys out of his pocket.

Sakura smiled. “I think you’re right. Tsunade is bitching more and more about all the paper work she has to do.”

The door opened and Kakashi guided Sakura into the dark apartment. Sakura’s heart raced as the door closed behind her. With the click of the door, Kakashi’s large hands were on her skin. He gently pushed her through his apartment, his hands dipping under her shirt.

Her breath hitched.

“He’ll do alright.” Kakashi mumbled into her neck as they tumbled onto the bed.

Sakura sighed, trembling in anticipation as Kakashi pulled down his mask and kissed her neck. “He’ll make us all proud.” She arched into his touch, warmth spreading over her cheeks.

He snorted into her chest. “I’m already proud of him. If what Neiji said was true-!”

Sakura rolled her eyes as Kakashi captured her lips.

Tsunade's Decision

“And how do you plea, Uchiha Sasuke?” Tsunade’s voice echoed in the small ‘courtroom.’

Sasuke stood in the open area in the middle of the room. He was wearing a navy shirt and pants, his feet bare. His ankles and wrist were chained to the floor. He leaned heavily on his right leg, and then his right.

He looked very indifferent for a man on trial.

Sakura watched as Sasuke’s eyes shifted from Tsunade, the elders, and Kakashi before landing on Naruto.

Something passed between them before Sasuke looked back at Tsunade.

He tilted his head up. “Guilty.”.

Sakura almost jumped. She wasn’t expecting that voice to come out of Sasuke. *His voice is much deeper…But that’s to be expected. Everything has changed so much.*

He’s not the same Sasuke we knew. Sakura glanced to her left; Naruto looked as serious as she’d ever seen him, his eyes glossy, his jaw set. She squeezed his hand in hers.

“To all charges?” Tsunade’s voice was skeptical. To Tsunade’s left sat the two elders, Shizune on her right, followed by Kakashi. Kakashi met her gaze, his eyes calming her slightly before he looked back at Sasuke. Sakura did the same.

Sasuke shrugged. As if, despite his chains, he was the one in control. It made Sakura uneasy.

“Speak.” Tsunade barked.

Sasuke rolled his eyes, “Yes.”

Tsuande sat in her chair. She was imposing. Powerful. “You told me in the hospital you were here on your own accord, though that hole in your chest would say otherwise.” Sakura glanced at Naruto, who was clenching his jaw tightly. “Why come back now?”

All eyes were on Sasuke. He shrugged his shoulders. “I defeated Orochimaru. I killed Itachi. There is nothing left.”

Nothing left? Sakura’s heart dropped with Naruto’s slack grip. She wanted to throttle Sasuke. *How could he say there is nothing left? What about Naruto?* It’s been the one thing that Naruto has been striving for. Needing. She doubled her grip.

“Nothing left out there?” She watched Tsunade’s eyes glance at Naruto before looking back at Sasuke.

Sasuke only stared.

Tsunade sighed, leaning back. “If that is your story, so be it.”

Sakura watched Sasuke’s brow furrowed, and lips forming a frown. He sighed. “It’s because…because there was really nothing out there for me…I…I shouldn’t have left in the first place…

“Naruto was right.” Sakura almost jumped out of her skin. *What?*

“Naruto was right,” Sasuke said again, almost reluctantly, “Joining Orochimaru, killing Itachi…it didn’t give me the peace of mind that I wanted. Revenge didn’t fill the emptiness in my chest.” Sasuke looked down at his chained hands, “when I had finally completed my goal, I felt just as I had before. As empty as I did the night Itachi murdered our family.” Sasuke stood straight, eyes focused on Tsunade. “I came back to make amends for what I did. For abandoning the village. For…” he glanced over at Sakura and Naruto before looking back at Tsunade. He tilted his head, “I hope that my killing of Orochimaru and a member of the Akatsuki will be enough to have me accepted back in the village. Maybe not as a Shinobi, yet…but back into my true home.” Sasuke smiled. Sakura felt her chest warm at the sight. She hadn’t see that smile in a *very long* time. “Back with the people who truly care about me.” His eyes shifted to them again.

Sakura felt Naruto trembling with excitement. She looked over to see him smiling maniacally.

Tsunade was quiet, studying Sasuke. Her eyes moved from him to the others in the room, pausing on Sakura and Naruto. After a moment, she nodded. “Alright,” she cleared her throat, “For now, you will be imprisoned.” Sasuke nodded. Sakura felt something in her stomach uncoil. “I don’t how much your little speech will help you, but it will be taken into account.” She looked at the elders, who were watching Sasuke carefully, “Once we reach a decision, we will reconvene.”

Sasuke nodded.

Tsunade stood, followed by Shizune and the elders.

That left Team Seven alone.

Before the door was fully closed, Naruto leapt to his feet, vaulting the table and crashing into Sasuke.

Naruto babbled incoherently as Sasuke's chained hands patted Naruto's side. His eyes closed as his hand settled on Naruto's for a moment.

Sakura couldn't help but smile. Sasuke opened his eyes, locking them on Sakura and gave her a small smile. "Hello, Sakura."

She gave him a small nod, "Sasuke-kun." Heat filled Sakura's chest as she felt a warm hand on the small of her back.

She felt Kakashi's fingers curl against her. "Congratulations, Sasuke-kun," Sakura felt a strange tension in his words. She'd have to ask him about it later.

"What's going to happen now?" Naruto asked loudly, breaking away from Sasuke, rubbing his face.

"You're going to get out of this room." Tsuande burst back into the room. Naruto jumped, and Sakura felt Kakashi's hand slip away from her. "Sasuke will be escorted to his cell. You can visit him there." ANBU materialized behind Tsuande, moving silently towards Sasuke. Sasuke held out his hands as Naruo took a step back as the operatives unshackled Sasuke from the ground. Sasuke and Naruto shared a look before his eyes found hers. He shrugged, following the ANBU.

Naruto went to follow, but Tsunade stopped him. When the door closed and it was only the three of them, Tsunade physically relaxed. "Well Naruto," she smiled, "How does it feel? You finally brought him back."

Naruto grinned, leaning back and putting his hands behind his head. He gave a small laugh.

Tsunade put her hands on her hips, sighing into a smile."Come with me to my office."

III

“Is there something I should know about, Hatake?” Tsunade said from between her fingers. One of her brows disappeared into her hairline as she watched him expectantly. Kakashi wasn’t sure if she was being rhetorical or not.

It was just them in her office; Tsunade dismissed the other two, asking Kakashi to stay back. Kakashi was glad; Kakashi was at his limit with Naruto’s whirlwind of energy. Today had been too much. Especially after the news Tsunade had shared with them when they first came back to her office. About Naruto’s new apprenticeship.

To be Hokage .

After the announcement, Kakashi used up most of his remaining energy to calm down Naruto, reiterating that he couldn’t go shouting his apprenticeship from the rooftops yet. But he could tell Hinata *quietly*.

Kakashi couldn’t help but notice Tsunade seemed on edge.

Tsunade leaned back in her chair. She tilted her head. “Well?”

“You seem tired, Hokage-sama.” Kakashi gave a small eye crease.

Instead of throwing something at him, she laughed, nodding. “It’s been one hell of a week. And getting longer.” She opened a drawer, pulling out a large sake bottle and two cups. She motioned to the chair across from her desk. “Sit.”

Kakashi did as he was told, watching her pour him a glass and herself one. He reached over and grabbed his cup, holding it gently in his hands as she gripped hers and shook her head, taking a deep sip.

They sat in silence, Kakashi watching the Hokage as her eyes searched his face. And then her glass.

“The elders are up to something,” She murmured into her glass. “When they stated Sasuke wasn’t to be executed *before* we started the ‘trial’ I knew something was up.” She took another sip, exhaling as she placed her glass down. “They have something planned for him.”

Kakashi leaned back in the chair and nodded. “The Sharingan is an important asset to the village. I doubt they would want to kill the last...producer of the blood limit.”

“And they won’t have him produce an heir and then kill him.”

“It would start the cycle all over.”

“Exactly.”

They sat in silence. Kakashi carefully took a sip through his mask.

“They…they said that Naruto could become Hokage…if I let them take care of it.” She whispered.

Kakashi paused, looking at her pained face. “Take care of what?”

She grimaced. “Sasuke.”

Sasuke ? Kakashi felt the stone that had been sitting in turn. “How are they going to take care of Sasuke?”

Her lip only curled.

Kakashi down the rest of his glass. She started filling it the moment it hit the table. “Do you get the same feeling as the rest of us?”

“I hope Naruto doesn’t have this feeling.”

Her eyes pierced him. He watched her carefully.

Tsuande growled, “Hatake,” She said after a moment. “Is there something *I need to know* ?” She said clearly. “Are you keeping something from me?”

His mind drifted to Sakura. To her smile. To how she looked in his bed the night before.

To how she looked looking at Sasuke earlier.

He shrugged. “I don’t understand.”

Tsunade frowned. Her head tilted to her right. “How’s Sakura taking this? With Sasuke being back.”

Kakashi didn’t take the bait. “She hasn’t mentioned him.” She hadn’t, but neither had he. And he wasn’t going to for as long as he could. *I’ll keep her to myself for as long as I can.*

“Not at all? Hm? Interesting.” Tsuande said lightly. “I would assume she would have said *something* about her old love coming back.”

Kakashi leaned back carefully. He spoke slowly, but not too slowly. “I

guess she has no interest in him. But who knows how long that will last. You know how young love is."

Tsunade's lip quirked. "You have little faith in my apprentice, Kakashi." She shifted, rummaging around a small pile of paperwork on her desk. She pulled out a folder, throwing it across the table, barely missing the sake bottle. "I'm sending you two on a mission for a while. Things are going to get hairy here, and it'll be better if you two aren't here. It'll give you *both* time to sort yourselves out."

Kakashi raised a brow. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not stupid Hatake." She said bluntly. "This is my village and I know what my shinobi do in their...spare time."

"So you know about Hinata-"

"I didn't just hear *about* it."

"It was really that loud?"

"You two leave tomorrow, Hatake." She sighed. "I'm counting on you to protect her from whatever is going to happen. That's your real mission."

Kakashi looked from her to the folder. He licked his lips, looking up from behind his fringe. "What's about to happen?" He whispered.

She shook her head, "I don't know," she admitted, "But I don't trust the elders. And I don't trust Sasuke around Sakura." Their eyes met as he rose from the chair, grabbing the folder. He'd look it over on his way down the steps. Sakura would be waiting for him at the entrance to the tower. "Just watch her back."

"Of course, Hokage-sama," Kakashi bowed before turning on his heel and left the room.

III

" *A mission* !?" Sakura hissed. " *Now* ? With all that's-"

"A shinobi's job comes first." Kakashi chided.

They were at the bar they visited a few days before. Back when everything was normal and the only thing they had to worry about was Ino sniffing *them* out. Sakura stared at her glass, filled with a pink, fruity drink lightly covered in alcohol. "But Sasuke-"

“That’s why she’s sending us away,” he said softly. Sakura felt his elbow brush her arm. “She says it’s going to get hairy.”

Hairy? Sakura snorted but nodded. She didn’t want to admit it, but when he told her about the mission, her soul soared. With all that had been happening, Sakura wanted nothing more than to get away. With him.

Despite the crowd in the bar, she leaned into him. His elbow moved as his arm came around, pulling her in a light hug.

The last time they came to this bar, things were so different. But her resolve was still the same. She wasn’t going anywhere. That she would remain by Kakashi’s side, however he wanted her to be. However he felt comfortable having her.

They had never talked about what was going on between them, but Sakura was sure she knew what this was. And that he knew too. He just needed time.

And they had all the time in the world.

“Sakura?” Kakashi whispered, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Yeah?” she looked up into his one eye, his eye filled with concern.

The look in his eyes made her heart squeeze and her fingers tingle. “Are you alright?” His fingers squeezed her arm lightly.

She smiled, “Yeah.” She slowly sat up straight, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to go get ready for tomorrow.” She stood up and paid her tab.

His hand slid away from her arm slowly. “Do you want me to walk you home?”

Sakura could see there was something else he wanted to talk about. She gave him a small nod. “Sure.” She could see him smile through his mask as he fished some ryo. He tossed it on the table and led her out of the bar. They walked in silence, turning down her road. His hand came to brush the small of her back as they made it up towards her apartment.

She fished her keys out of her pocket when Kakashi’s hand came to rest on the door near her head, his words making her freeze. “What *are* we?” Sakura froze, eyes widening as her heart hammered. His

fingers curled and he moved to push away, but she grabbed his hand.

What are we? She slowly turned. He was looking down at her, his eyes shining in the lamp light. “We’ve never talked about it,” He whispered, his other hand came up to her neck, brushing the hair back. She leaned into his touch. “And we are kind of just *going with it,* but with Sasuke…” he trailed off, looking slightly deflated.

Sakura licked her lips, taking a step forward. “We’re whatever you want us to be.” She whispered. “ *I’m* whatever you want me to be.” Butterflies erupted in her chest as she grinned broadly. “I’m not leaving for *Sasuke* .” she said incredulously. “Not now that I know what’s beneath that mask.”

He shook his head and smiled. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Nevermind. Let’s just forget it,” he was about to move away, but she advanced, wrapping her arms around him. His arms moved automatically, returning the hug, making her feel safe. *Home* . She leaned into him, inhaling his scent.

He buried his head in her hair, breathing in deeply. They stood like that out in front of her apartment for who knows how long. Eventually, he tightened his hold for one last squeeze before releasing. She let him take a step back, his hands trailing down her arms. She hooked two fingers in his. She beamed. “We’ll figure this out, okay? Together.” She gently let go, her hands coming to her sides. “Goodnight, Kakashi,” she turned back to her door, unlocking it and cracking it open. She turned back, nodding her head towards the opening, “…unless you want to come in?” She gasped when his fingers tilted her chin up, he pulled down his mask and brushed his lips against hers. Her head spun as he pressed their lips together firmly. She sighed, opening her mouth and his tongue gently dipped into her mouth. Slowly she turned, her hands blindly searching for purchase. They found his forearms as one of his hands found her hip, pulling her against him. He sighed as their tongues tangled, her nails digging into his sleeves, curling like her toes. Her fingers moved up his arms, but before she could snake her hand around his neck, pulling him into her apartment, he pulled away. Before she could blink, his mask was back in place and so was their usual distance. But his cheeks were flushed at the hem of his mask. He gave her a small bow and a wave as he walked away.

“Goodnight, Sakura.”

After the Mission

“That was the longest, most *pointless* mission ever.” Sakura mumbled as she stretched her arms above her head. She looked at Kakashi, whose hands were in his pockets, shoulders hunched. Her chest warmed pleasantly.

He glanced her over, eyes creasing, “It wasn’t too bad, hm?” He pulled his right hand from his pocket and hooked two fingers in hers

Sakura snorted, shifting her hand to interlace with his. “I guess,” he squeezed.

Her ears warmed.

A disease spread through a small village outside Mist. Their mission was to isolate, contain, and heal. But it seemed that the dire need of a top medic was highly exaggerated. It wasn’t any worse than the common cold and the only thing dead was a few acres of unattended crops. Sakura and Kakashi had spent more time farming rather than healing.

And other things.

Sakura leaned into Kakashi, “if I have to pick one more weed-”

He chuckled, kissing the top of her head. “Your poor house plants.” She smacked him lightly. He let out a dramatic *omph!* She rolled her eyes. He pulled his hand out of hers and wrapped his arm around her waist. “It wasn’t all a waste.” He murmured into her hair.

She nodded, closing her eyes, listening to the birds chirping and the gentle breeze sweep through the forest. Sakura remembered their late nights and early mornings together; a rarity at home. As much as Sakura was glad to be coming home, she will miss waking up in the morning in Kakashi's strong arms wrapped around her waist, his smell enveloping her.

It was something to get used to. Something she wanted to get used to. Something they talked about.

She stood on her tiptoes, her nose trailing up his neck before kissing his mask. When he didn't respond, she looked up. She frowned at his narrowed eyes. He took a step, breaking free and then Sakura then

sensed it. Someone was coming towards them. Quickly.

Sakura shifted behind Kakashi. Kakashi's shoulders slackened.

"Ino."

Sakura's eyes widened as she saw blond and purple dashing down the road.

Sakura stepped around Kakashi, her fingers trailing against Kakashi's arm one last time before racing towards her.

"Sakura!" Ino doubled over, face red, eyes bloodshot and hair disheveled. She was heaving, body shaking.

"Ino? Ino, what's wrong? You look like hell." Sakura leaned down and pressed a hand to her friend's back.

"Are you being chased?" Kakashi was behind Sakura. She looked up to see him scanning the treetops, pulling out a kunai.

Ino shook her head. "Tsunade-sama said you'd be coming home today. I-I came to meet you." She leaned into Sakura's touch.

"Ino, what's wrong?" Sakura rubbed large circles on her back.

Ino shook her head. "It's the village elders! And Sasuke! They've-They-he-" Ino gripped Sakura, pulling her into a tight hug. Sakura looked up at Kakashi, her stomach churning. They hadn't talked about Sasuke during the entire mission. She hadn't really thought about him at all.

"Ino," Sakura pulled Ino away. She wiped a tear from Ino's cheek. "Tell me what's wrong." She whispered.

Ino shook her head, she grabbed Sakura's hand, "You have to see!"

Sakura looked back at Kakashi before tripping down the road.

The rest of the journey was in tense silence. Sakura's mind swirled at what all the possibilities could be.

Did they decide to kill Sasuke? That seemed unlikely. *And Ino wouldn't be this upset.* Sakura shook her head. *Naruto would be the one here, not Ino.* She wasn't sure when Ino had stopped holding a candle for Sasuke, but it was probably around the same time Sakura did. They had both moved on, Ino flirting with any man under the sun and Sakura had Kakashi.

Kakashi. Their relationship was complex, becoming more complicated by the day, as they struggled to put a label on what they had. But also becoming more simplistic. This mission made her realize she wanted to wake up next to him every morning. To be by his side. She looked back at him and smiled, but his brow was knitted and focused. His eyes flitted to hers and the air rushed out of her lungs. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to hold him. To make that look disappear.

“This way!” Ino said they rushed through the gates. Sakura turned to focus on her. “Come on!” Ino tugged Sakura towards the Hokage tower

Sakura’s heart hammered her chest. She looked back to see Kakashi had disappeared. “Ino-pig! What is the matter?”

“The notice. It was posted a few days after you and Kakashi-sensei left.” Ino stopped them right outside the tower. Her jaw was set and her eyes glossy.

“Notice?” Sakura looked from Ino to the tower. The only thing that was different from the last time she stood outside the tower was a large white bulletin right outside the entrance. As Sakura scanned the notice, it felt like her body was doused in cold water. Her body went numb. A large lump formed in the back of her throat. Her eyes burned. She couldn't breathe.

She shook her head. *This can't be happening.*

“What are we going to do Sakura?” Ino’s voice seemed lost and far away, her hand slipping into hers.

“I-I don’t know.” Sakura choked, grabbing onto Ino as tight as she could. “I don’t know.”

III

As decreed by the Fifth Hokage, the Elders, Homura Mitokado and Koharu Utatane , and the Sixth Hokage elect, a required screening of all unmarried Kunoichi, Genin to ANBU rank, through the age of 26, will take place for the courting of Uchiha Sasuke, the leader, and last member of the Uchiha Clan.

All women must undergo a medical and psychiatric evaluation as well as an interview to see who is the most worthy of this prestigious honor of making history: reviving an almost lost clan.

Screening begins midsummer, and the candidate will be chosen before the first frost, with a two year courting before marriage and consummation.

There are no exceptions. All weddings accepted by the village between Kunoichi will be postponed or nullified until after the coronation of the new Uchiha matriarch.

Any who refuse will be exiled or sentenced to death.

III

Tsunade reclined in her chair, paperwork forgotten as she watched the three people in front of her.

Ino fidgeted at the door, her eyes down cast as she wrung her hands. Kakashi stood right out of arms length of Sakura. His shoulders were surprisingly straight, breathing calmly. His visible eye looked bored, but his hands were fisted at his side, knuckles white.

Tsunade's hair stood on end.

Tsunade tried not to look at Sakura; unlike Kakashi, her body was completely slack, her eyes dulled. She looked broken.

Tsunade wanted to pull her into her arms and protect her from what came next.

"It was decided by the elders, Tsunade-sama, and myself." Naruto said from Tsunade's left. He sounded political, serious. So unlike *Naruto* . "We decided that this was the best solution." Kakashi tilted his head to the left. "Having the evaluations will ensure not only compatiblity with Sasuke, but they will be able to…handle him." Tsunade wondered if Hinata helped him write his little speech. Or if it was the elders. He was desperately trying to win their favor. He was learning quickly that he needed their favor to get anything done.

Naruto was smarter than he looked.

"Handle?" Ino's voice was full of disbelief.

"Not physically, but mentally. He is Sasuke. He's…been through a lot, you know."

"What about the women?" Kakashi's voice was sharper than any blade. He looked between Ino and Sakura. "This isn't fair to them."

Naruto scowled, like those old codgers. She's was going to have to nip

that in the bud. “Neither Ino or Sakura have been chosen.” *Yet* was loud in the silence. “The best woman will be picked-”

“Which will be Sakura,” Kakashi challenged.

“Not Hinata.” Ino spat.

Tsunade’s teeth gritted as she felt Naruto’s kyuubi chakra flare. “Naruto,” She warned.

Naruto took a deep breath. And another. “Ino, you know why Hinata isn’t-”

“Because she’s fucking the next Hokage?”

“Kakashi,” Tsunade was surprised when Sakura’s eyes came to life. She glanced up at Kakashi with a challenging glare.

He took a step towards her, but didn't touch her.

“The Bakyugan and Sharingan would clash and it could cause serious problems.” Naruto was quiet.

“How convenient-”

“You think I didn't try to keep Sakura out of this?!” Naruto snapped. Kakashi stood tall, taking a step forward. “Sakura deserves to find her own husband.”

“And what about the rest of us!?” Ino shouted.

“Enough!” Tsunade snapped. Everyone but Sakura stared at her. She sighed. “We are *all* jumping to conclusions.” She at Naruto before closing her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Tsuande-baachan…” Naruto’s hand landed on her shoulder, making the weight double at the sound of concern in his voice.

This isn’t fair…Not for anyone. She opened her eyes and looked at Sakura.

“Sakura,” her apprentice didn't look up. “Sakura!” she barked. Sakura blinked, shaking her head and focusing on Tsunade.

Kakashi touched her arm. “Sakura, go home. Nothing’s going to happen today, or in the next few days. Take some time off. I’ll see you at the hospital the first of the week.” She looked at Naruto, “Make

sure she gets home." When the boy nodded, she turned to Kakashi, "Since you're here, we'll do the report. Ino, leave."

Naruto coaxed Sakura out of the office, Ino trailing after them. When the door closed with a small click Tsunade sighed. "You alright?" Kakashi didn't move. Tsunade sighed. "I told you they were up to something. You had-"

"You agreed to this?" Kakashi's voice was low, sharp.

Tsunade was careful with her words, "It was this, or they wouldn't let Naruto become Hokage."

"So Sakura is the cost-"

"If I didn't agree," Tsunade watched Kakashi's jaw clench, "the council was going to pick a successor. And I don't trust the council to do that. Look at what happened with Danzo." Kakashi didn't say anything and she sighed, "It was the only choice." She said softly, but firmly. "You know he's the only person for the job." She continued when Kakashi didn't say anything, "And Naruto deserves this. He is the best man for the job." Tsunade watched Kakashi's resolve crumble. "Even if Sakura isn't picked, I think she would do it. If she knew it meant Naruto could fulfill his dream." Her mind flashed to a small boy, screaming at her that he was going to be the next Hokage, but she pushed it to the back of her mind. "That's who she is." Tsunade snorted, "you think she's going to choose you over that?" Kakashi's eyebrow twitched. "She loves Naruto too much."

Kakashi was silent. Tsunade let him process everything. "She'd sacrifice herself for him…" Kakashi mumbled.

"She'd do her duty to the village."

They were silent.

"Do we know it's her?"

Tsunade sighed, "No. But I won't make that bet."

Kakashi nodded. "What are we supposed to do?"

Tsunade frowned, "We wait and pray."

Realizations and Broken Coffee Tables

Sakura was putting fresh sheets on her bed when there was a small knock on the door.

Kakashi?

She smiled as she walked briskly to the door. He hadn't come by the night before, but she figured he needed time to process what was happening like she did.

Sakura didn't want to admit what was inevitable; the obvious solution to this. So she didn't. She focused on what she could. On cleaning her apartment. On Kakashi.

Kakashi!

Her body scared as she ripped the door open. Her smile faltered at the sight of dark eyes. She took a step back, her fingers gripping the door, “Sasuke?” She didn't realize he'd been released.

Sasuke’s eyes took her in. “Sakura,” he nodded, “can I come in?”

She blinked, digging her nails into the door. “Why?”

His smile didn't reach his eyes. “We need to talk.”

She shook her head, “I just got home from a three month mission. I need to rest.” His smile slipped as he crossed his arms on his chest. *That meant go away.* She sighed. “I don’t want to talk to you right now, okay? Maybe tomorrow.”

“It’s about the search.”

She laughed, “Oh is that what you’re calling it? I was actually hoping I could forget about it, even if it was just for the rest of the afternoon. Thank you for bringing it up.”

Sasuke scowled, his eyes flickering to the door before coming back to her. “I wanted to apologize.”

Sakura frowned , “Apologize? For what?”

He gestured to the door. She lifted her chin. “I didn’t know this was what they were going to do. Can we talk about this inside?”

“There’s more to say?” she swore she almost saw his eyes soften. She sighed, realizing he wasn’t leaving anytime soon, she stepped aside. “Make it quick.”

He bowed his head, walking passed her. Before she closed the door, she felt a familiar chakra signature on the roof. She stepped out, looking to. She smiled as she saw a masked ANBU sitting comfortably on top of her apartment space.

He gave her a small little wave. “Ugly,”

She gave a small nod. “What are you doing, Sai?”

He pointed down towards her apartment, and she nodded. She felt exhaled, feeling lighter. She walked back into the house, leaving the door slightly ajar. She scowled at the sight of Sasuke sitting on her couch.

“Go ahead, make yourself comfortable.” She clipped. He watched get carefully. Sakura felt like a mouse under the gaze of a cat.

She pulled her shoulders back, hands on her hips. “You wanted to talk?” She nodded. “Talk.”

He watched her for a few moments before he looked down at the coffee table. “You know this isn't what I was expecting when coming back.” He confessed softly.

Sakura crossed her arms. “What’s not what you expected?”

He held out his hands, “The homecoming. I hadn’t expected to be welcomed with open arms, but at least welcomed by Naruto and you…maybe even Kakashi-sensei.

“I didn't want all this pomp and circumstance.”

He was silent for a moment. “We all have made lives for ourselves, Sasuke. *Without you.* And you coming back and this ‘search-’” Sakura sighed, lost for words.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“You didn’t mean to have the whole female population looked over like animals to see who is the best fit for you?” she couldn’t keep the anger from her voice. “What did you expect?!”

“They said in order for me to stay in the village I would have to find a

woman to start a family with. To have the bloodline go on."

"And you agreed."

"They asked me if I knew any possible 'candidates.'" He scowled. "I told them I didn't know of any candidates, but the only person I thought that might be willing…was you."

Sakura's mind went blank. " *You said what* ?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry."

Sakura felt out of body as she crossed the room. A chakra charged hand rising. She felt resistance and then nothing as there was a blur. And then Sasuke wasn't in front of her and her couch was overturned. She felt Sai's presence behind her but she ignored him. " *Why* ?!" She yelled. She advanced and gripped his shirt, pulling him to her level, "Why would they pick anyone else, if you show a god damn interest in me, you bastard!" Her eyes burned as she heaved. She shook her head and swallowed the lump in her throat. "Why would you do that to me?" He didn't look at her, making the anger overflow. "We were teammates! Friends!" She shoved him to the ground. "It's a shame you're protected by the council, or I would kill you now." She watched him stand up, brushing himself off. She wiped her face. "Get out of my house."

"Sakura-"

"Leave my house through the door or *through* it." She said darkly.

"I *am* sorry." Sasuke whispered before turning and heading towards the door.

"Nice hook, Ugly," Sai said as he walked past.

Sakura felt her energy drain as Sai closed the door behind them.

Sakura stood in her living room, willing her brain to think *anything* .

But it was silent. And so was her chest. She swallowed, rubbing her face before moving to her couch, carefully righting it. As she set it on its feet, her eyes landed on her coffee table. It was cluttered with a couple of glasses of water and even more photographs; one was of her and Naruto hugging each other outside the ramen shop. One was of the new Team Seven; Naruto, Sakura, Kakashi, and Sai all standing together proud.

Happy.

Her eyes flitted to a vase of dying red posies.

She felt like she hadn't been happy in years, although it was yesterday she had been smiling, holding hands with Kakashi.

Kakashi's face clouded her mind as guilt and betrayal filled her.

How was she going to tell Kakashi?

Rage coursed through her like a tidal wave. With a guttural yell, she slammed her fist into the table. The sound of splintering wood made Sakura's blood sing. Wood fragments exploded around her as the sound of cracking glass reverberated around her. Then, an eerie silence filled the room.

She watched the dust settle before her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor. She heaved loudly, tears finally falling.

How am I going to tell Kakashi?

She tried to catch her breath, but her throat was tight. She shuddered, her body trembling as she pulled her chest to her knees. She gasped for breath as she forced the words from her chest. "That son of a bitch…" She buried her face into her knees, "That bastard!"

"Shhh…" Sakura jolted as she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her body knew who it was before she did, leaning into Kakashi's hand as her head became heavy.

Her lungs relaxed and she was able to take a deep breath. Kakashi hummed, his hand moving in circles along her back as she felt her body drain of *everything* . "Shhh…" His hands moved, moving up her arms before slipping to her waist. Exhaustion filled her every pore as Kakashi pulled her back against him. She leaned her head against his chest, closing her eyes as she focused on her breathing. On Kakashi's heartbeat against her head.

Sakura blinked wearily as she felt arms hook behind her back and under her knees. She opened heavy eyes, her arms encircling Kakashi's neck, watching him as he carried her down the hall. She tucked her head into the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent as she listened to his heartbeat. Her body and mind were now pleasantly numb as he carried her across the room. She heard him pull back the covers and gingerly laid her in the soft bed. She curled up, back facing him as she

felt a dip in the bed. Kakashi's arms were back around her, pulling her in and tucking her snuggling against him. She felt her eyes lull close as she felt his fingers sift through her hair. She sighed, turning, pressing her face into his black shirt, nuzzling into his warmth before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

III

Kakashi watched Ino put her hands on her hips and shake her head. "I'm guessing it's not good…" Ino whispered, surveying the room. She looked at Kakashi. "Naruto told me Sai escorted Sasuke over, much to his displeasure." She frowned. She looked back at the wreckage of Sakura's apartment. "I didn't even know Sai could get displeased…"

"He's learning." Kakashi murmured as he walked carefully to the middle of the room, avoiding splintered wood or broken glass. He looked back to the bedroom where Sakura was still sleeping.

Ino sighed. Kakashi glanced back at her as she picked up a large piece of glass. "Apparently Sasuke said some things he shouldn't have." She pressed her lips together. "Even Sai knew it wasn't smart."

Kakashi hummed, gingerly picking up a broken picture frame, flipping it over. It was the picture of her and Naruto together from two years ago, when Naruto finally asked Hinata out. Naruto invited Kakashi and Sakura out to celebrate, and Kakashi thought it would be funny to commemorate the event by him taking a picture of Naruto with another woman.

Kakashi smiled. He and Sakura had been together for three months at the time. Sakura laughed later and told him she was smiling so wide because she thought it was funny he was taking a picture of her in another man's arms.

He snorted, it was *Naruto* .

And…and they didn't have any idea what they were doing.

I suppose some things haven't changed.

"Are you even listening to me?" Kakashi looked up. Ino only rolled her eyes. "According to Sai, Sasuke told Sakura that he had told the Council that he wanted Sakura to be his wife."

"Is that so?"

“As much as that kind of relieves me, it also is upsetting. Poor Sakura…” Ino looked towards the bedroom. “Is she alright?”

Kakashi shrugged. “She’s sleeping right now.” Kakashi searched for the other pictures, wiping them off before taking them into the kitchen and setting them down on the table. Ino was looking around, lost.

Kakashi moved towards the broken table. “Help me with this?” Ino nodded, picking up one half as he picked up the other, careful not to make too much noise as they headed out the front door. “We can just take them to the trash. She’ll need a new one.” Ino followed him to the trash, dumping her half of the table right after him.

As he turned to go back towards her apartment, Ino stood in front of him, hands on her hips. “So why are you here?”

Kakashi side stepped Ino and the question. “Sai must have found me before he found Naruto, I guess.” He kicked off his shoes at the door and moved towards the kitchen, grabbing the garbage can. “He said Sakura was mad, so I came over.”

“Right away?” Ino didn’t hide her surprise. Kakashi only shrugged, picking up shards of splintered wood and glass. Ino joined him after a moment. “Sai said that Sasuke *did* feel bad about it.”

Ino sounded as skeptical as Kakashi felt. “Sai also has the emotional span of a piece of paper.”

Ino was silent for a moment then whispered, “Maybe he really does care about her.” Ino said hopefully. “Maybe-maybe it won’t be too bad.”

“Maybe she won’t be picked.” Kakashi felt Ino’s eyes for a few moments. He did his best to ignore her.

“You really care about her, don’t you?” Ino said, throwing the last bit of debris away.

Kakashi put the trash can down, stretching his back until he heard a crack, his mind drifting. “Yes, I do.” He looked at Ino, who’s brows knitted together. He gave her a broad grin, smiling with his eyes. “She’s my former student, after all.” Sakura had made a point to tell him that she hadn’t told Ino about them. More because if she told Ino, then the whole village would know.

Kakashi wondered if that had been the right call.

The Meeting

Sakura relaxed as she came floating back to earth.

She sighed contently as Kakashi placed open mouth kisses down her neck, his tongue tasting the sweat that covered her body. His silver hair tickled her right cheek as he dipped down to her collarbone. She blinked heavily, her body shivering pleasantly as she smiled down at him. His breathing was hot on her chest, the muscles in his arms and shoulders twitched as they supported his weight as he slowly pulled himself away from her. He looked up at her with mismatched eyes. She watched as the tomoe's swirled, memorizing her. Her stomach erupted in butterflies as he inhaled, shifting to kiss up her body again.

Her toes curled as he kissed up her neck feverishly, hands running up her hips. "Sakura," he whispered hoarsely. The emotion in his voice made her throught tighten. She tilted her head and their noses brushed. Their lips brushed as his hip pressed into her leg. She closed her eyes, her body arching into him.

Despite her body's protest, she moved her hands up his arms, grasping his shoulders and pushing against him lightly. He resisted, pressing his lips to hers, taking her lower lip between his teeth. She pressed a hot kiss to his lips before her hand came to cup his jaw.

"Come on," she whispered against his lips, "I have to get up in a few hours." She tried to sound convincing. She nudged his face to meet hers.

He captured her lips, kissing her deeply before pulling away enough to kiss her behind the ear, his left thumb rubbing circles on her right hip as his other hand cupped her left breast. "Not yet." His tongue trailed from her ear down her neck to her breast, capturing the bud between his teeth.

She sighed pleasantly, her hand coming to the hair on his neck, her short nails sifting through his hair.

She *wanted* to keep going. But if she didn't stop him now, he wouldn't stop until dawn. She placed both hands on the side of his face, pulling him up. "Come on." She kissed him slowly. "Let's go back to sleep." He finally conceded, pulling back and studying her face. She shivered as his dark eye seemed to scream *something* . It rocked her to her core but she wasn't entirely sure *what* . After a moment he dipped down

and pressed a kiss to her lips again before rolling off her. She shivered at his lack of heat but it wasn't long before his hand was around her waist, pulling her into his chest.

They lay like that for a few moments. Sakura let her mind slow.

They had been like this for weeks. Ever since they came back from the mission, Kakashi began sneaking into her apartment in the early hours of the morning, waking her up to kisses, or to him pulling her into his chest, where she would turn and kiss him to oblivion.

In the three years they had been 'together,' Sakura had learned that Kakashi was more reserved and thoughtful with his emotions, even when they were alone. So this new development of his early morning visits, and overwhelming gazes over the past weeks, where he was more affectionate, wanting to kiss her and hold her more than usual…

It scared her.

Hold her like he was going to lose her.

Their relationship had started out as a night out drinking with comrades. Kakashi had gotten into a drinking contest with Gai, which Sakura thought he lost on purpose. Especially with the determination in his eye as he asked to walk her home. *Something* had been swirling between them that they had both been afraid to name. And so he walked her home; both of them stumbling into each other as their hands all but touched.

Until they did as he bid her goodnight. Their fingers twisted together and she tugged him down and kissed him. He didn't pull away, but he didn't return it. Not until two days later where he returned it ten fold.

And they never talked about what they were. There was no need. No real reason. Sure, Ino harassed her to date more and Sakura was sure Gai warned Kakashi of his slipping youth or something, but they were comfortable.

At least Sakura *had* been.

It wasn't until she opened her front door to see Sasuke instead of Kakashi that Sakura really thought about what their relationship was.

Or wasn't.

It had started as a fling. Once a month. And then months at a time after long missions. They would seek each other out and find release. But as Kakashi kissed the base of her neck, mumbling incoherently into her shoulder, she knew that they weren't casual lovers anymore.

And she wanted more. *So much more* . And she had a feeling that if she asked, Kakashi would give her anything she wanted.

Her throat tightened and tears stung her eyes.

"What time do you have to be *there* ?" His voice was slightly strained.

There . There was where she would be judged. Inspected like a piece of meat.

Picked for the next Mrs. Uchiha.

"Nine," she whispered, pushing away her thoughts. She turned, burying her face in his chest. She let her fingers splay, his heart beating slowly against her palm. He kissed the top of her head. She closed her eyes, swallowing the lump in her throat as she inhaled his scent.

It was her favorite thing. The only thing that was going to get her through this. For better, or for worse.

When did we become this? She looked up at Kakashi's naked face; something she knew he only showed to her. He was freshly shaven, his face looking almost boyish. His eyes were closed, his breathing even. She wanted to reach up, to touch his bare cheek. Instead she bit her lip.

What about us ?

"Sakura?" An onyx eye peered down at her. "Sleep," commanded. Then he smirked, sleepily, "Or we get to do what *I* want to do."

Never let you go.

She nodded, closing her eyes. She took a shaky breath, pushing the bad thoughts from her mind, focusing on the sound of Kakashi's heart, lulling her into a dreamless sleep.

III

Tsunade hated every part of this. It showed just how little true power she had as Hokage.

Despite being the one with their face on the side of a mountain, she was still at the mercy of the elders.

“Haruno Sakura.” Tsunade’s eyes went from Koharu to her apprentice, back to the old hag. “You are an exceptional shinobi with marvelous medic skills.” Sakura stood straight, jaw set, and eyes unfocused. “You are hard working, smart and beautiful,” Tsunade held back a snort as Sakura’s fist clenched. “Tell us why you should be picked for this *fantastic* opportunity.”

Keep it together, Sakura. Tsunade’s eyes hardened, trying to scream at Sakura to stay calm. She had warned Sakura that going off script wouldn’t help her. Though, after the stunt that Uchiha pulled…Sakura didn’t have much of a leg to stand on.

Sakura’s eyes moved across each one of the council members at the table, stopping on her. Tsunade wanted to look away, but she wouldn’t back down. Sakura didn’t deserve that. She didn’t deserve any of this.

Sakura took a deep breath, holding her chin up high. “I shouldn’t, and neither should anyone else.”

Damnit, Sakura.

Despite it all, Tsunade smirked.

Koharu was less than pleased. “And why not?”

“He doesn’t deserve this! Why should we make a special exception for him! To choose whomever he wants for his-his baby maker?”

Tsunade couldn’t help but snort. The two elders looked at her with distaste before turning back to her student.

“And what does he deserve?” Homura peered.

Sakura tilted her chin higher. “Death.”

Tsunade bit her lip. She watched Koharu frown. “Do you not know why we’re doing this? The reason for all of Sasuke’s troubles is because the Uchiha clan did not trust the village. They were going to declare war. They were going to kill every man woman and child in this village until they were satisfied.

“We are trying to show the rest of the clans that we are able to

negotiate."

Tsunade leaned back in her chair. *I'm sure* .

The two next to her and Sakura stared at her. "Is there something you would like to say, Tsunade?"

Tsunade looked at Sakura, "Why don't you tell her what this is really about? Tell her about the catch. Why I haven't told you all to shove this whole thing up your ass? I really don't see any reason to continue this if stupid-"

"Enough!" Koharu snapped.

Sakura's face fell, "What are you-?"

Koharu frowned, "This is not the time for your frivolities-"

Tsunade reclined in her chair, "No. Tell her how in order for *Naruto* to become Hokage, this-" Tsunade motioned around the room. " *This* has to happen." Sakura's face paled.

"Tsunade!" Koharu snapped.

Tsunade crossed her arms, "She deserves to know what's really going on. She's an exceptional shinobi after all," she looked down at the papers in front of her, "you even wrote 'beautiful!' with an exclamation point!" Tsunade's glower was darker than the elders, "I do think it's strange that Uchiha's whole team is involved in this. In order for Naruto to fulfill his dream, Sakura must give up everything she's worked for to satisfy a man she hates…"

"We never said Haruno Sakura was picked-"

"But is this not just another sacrifice as a Shinobi of of the Leaf?" Tsunade's comment was met with silence. Tsunade looked back to her protege, who was watching her with wide eyes.

She lifted her chin. "Is there anything else you would like to ask her? What her dreams are? Her perfect husband? Her favorite color-"

"You're being biased!"

"And you're not!?" Tsunade barked, "You've been hell bent on Sakura since that idiot said something two months ago. This isn't just about making tiny Uchihas. This is about the women, being perfect little housewives."

“ *If* they accept this, then they will no longer be taking missions. They will stay at home and raise their family.”

Tsunade scoffed, “ *If* ? You say that like there is a choice.”

“Stay home?” Sakura’s voice cracked. “But-but what is the-”

“We want to have the strongest Uchiha clan we could possibly have, Haruno Sakura. We also don’t need mothers being killed while they raise a family.

“You will be paid of course, for-”

“This *mission?* ” Tsunade snarked.

“What-what about the hospital?” Sakura’s voice cracked.

The silence that filled the room was louder than any outburst Tsunade could have said.

“The well being of the Uchiha clan must come first, Haruno-san.” Koharu said simply. “You understand.”

Tsunade gritted her teeth.

After a moment, Sakura spoke, her voice reminiscent of the young girl that cried in her office all those years ago. “It’s…it’s okay. I understand.” She bowed, voice cracking. “Anything else, Hokage-sama, Elders?” Tsunade felt her heart rip as Sakura’s hands shook.

“No, you are free to go.” Koharu said briskly.

Sakura hadn’t closed the door before all eyes were on Tsunade, “Are you happy?” Koharu snapped.

“Are you?” Before they could answer, Tsunade rose, stalking towards the door, “You’re going about this wrong. If you…just let nature take its course and force Uchiha to be a decent human being…” She turned and glared, “You’ll be sorry when the best Kunoichi this village has ever seen is out of commission.”

“You’re wrong, Tsunade,” Tsunade paused. She turned back to see Koharu snubbing her nose. “This isn’t about controlling the kuniochi.”

Homura cleared his throat, “it’s about staying in control of Uchiha Sasuke as well.” Tsunade’s heart thudded in her head. “We need someone who can understand the importance of what we’re trying to

do."

"And we never said Sakura is going to be chosen, Tsunade." Koharu bristled. "There are other fantastic candidates."

Tsunade frowned, stalking out the door, slamming it shut.

III

"You know," Ino said, plucking lightly at the dying leaves of the bouquet of flowers that sat at Sakura's kitchen table. "You're sensei is really weird."

Sakura had been bustling around the kitchen, preparing tea. She turned, raising an eyebrow. "What? Who?"

"Kakashi-sensei always sends you flowers."

Sakura stared at her for a moment before shaking her head, turning back to the tea, "How did you know that Kakashi sent them?"

Ino raised a brow, plucking the card out of the bouquet. "I own the flower shop."

Sakura took the pot off the stove, fishing two cups out of the cabinet. "Yes, he sent them. Why? I have no idea." She said honestly, looking at the flowers lovingly before setting everything down. "He's really thoughtful, but also very late. They could be for my birthday."

"The birthday that was five months ago?" Sakura shrugged.

Ino sighed, "so what now? We have to sit here and wait for them to choose?"

Sakura shrugged, looking as nonchalant as she could, though her heart pounded in her chest. "I say we finish this tea and go to the bar." Sakura almost laugh at Ino's slack jaw.

"It's-it's ten a.m…." Ino gaped.

Sakura laughed, "I don't mean now." Sakura held out her cup, "Let's wait until noon."

Ino laughed, her cup clinking Sakura's with a small *tink* . "I'll drink to that."

III

“Home sweet home,” Kakashi adjusted Sakura in his arms as he kicked his front door closed. He would have taken her back to her apartment, but his was closer. And with it being six p.m. and her this drunk…he thought it would be better for the less people to see her, the better.

Or maybe not. Kakashi mused, looking down at the women in his arms. *It would make her look bad and maybe they* wouldn’t *pick her.* Sakura made a small noise as he kicked out of his shoes and carried her towards the bedroom. *At least she’s a lot better off than Ino.* Probably because Ino wasn’t fully trained by Tsunade.

“I have to do it.” It was the first words Sakura had said since they left the bar. He looked down; her green eyes were glossy and red.

He placed her gently on the bed, rubbing his thumb over her cheeks, wiping away her tears. “Do what, Sakura?”

But he already knew.

“I have to marry Sasuke.” She choked. “Naruto deserves to become Hokage.”

Kakashi’s heart clenched in his chest. He studied her for a moment before moving to pull off her shoes. “So you know.” He tossed her shoes in the corner. His hand moved to her leg, squeezing gently.

Sakura looked up at the ceiling. “Tsunade told me. During the interview, if you could call it that.” Kakashi didn’t say anything as he stood. He moved towards his dresser, pulling out a clean shirt. He turned back to the bed to see Sakura twisted onto her stomach, cradling his pillow. His heart squeezed as he moved back towards the bed. He carefully helped into sitting, helping her out of her shirt, peeling it off before helping her shimmy out of her skirt. He held out the shirt, but she lunged at him. He steadied them as her fingers gripped the hem of his shirt and yanked it unceremoniously off his shirt. He shook his head as she yanked his shirt over her head.

His lip quirked as he watched her struggle with the sleeves. He placed the fresh shirt on the bed as he wrangled one of the sleeves. “Arms.” He coached. She giggled as her hands shot through the sleeves. She scrunched up the sleeves, her hands small in the large shirt. She pulled up the mask and inhaled, closing her eyes. She opened them, blinking brightly up at him. A lump formed in his throat as he smiled.

She pulled down her mask, her smile faltering. She leaned back on the bed. “It’s his dream” Kakashi sat on the edge of the bed. Sakura’s eyes

were bright. “It has been since he was so small…” she glanced at Kakashi. “I-I can’t keep him from that.”

“But you can’t give up your whole life for him.”

“And what about everything that he’s given up for us? The whole village?” She sniffed. “It’s only fair.”

“No, it’s not.” Kakashi scooted up the bed, his right hand coming behind her head and pulling her towards him. He kissed her forehead. “You shouldn’t sacrifice yourself. He wouldn’t-”

“I’m a shinobi.” Kakashi pulled away. Her eyes were far away as her chin trembled. “I swore I would do what I could for my village.

“If this is what is being asked of me…” her face grimaced as her trembling fingers pressed into his face, “Who am I to turn down the call of duty?”

Kakashi felt his head shaking, his hand grasping her wrist. “Sakura,”

“It won’t be too bad,” she nodded, “we were teammates before…” she looked into his eyes. “It won’t be bad. can do it, right?”

His chest tightened and he pulled down his mask and kissed her, softly. When he lifted his head, she was crying. His hand cupped her cheek before pulling down her mask, kissing her with everything he had as he felt her hands roam under his shirt, moaning softly. He felt her lift at his shirt, which he slipped off with one smooth motion. She broke their kiss and kissed his neck softly.

“I just wish we didn’t have to end…” she breathed against his neck. He collapsed next to her, pulling her close to him. He inhaled her scent that was simply *Sakura* and kissed her neck. Her breathing evened out and he laid there, holding her, staring at the picture of Team Kakashi. *Why did Sasuke come back and destroy everything we’ve built for ourselves?* He ran his hands through her silky pink locks. *I will always be here for you Sakura. I will protect you.*

Eggs and Confirmation

Sakura stumbled out of Kakashi's bedroom the next morning, gripping the wall as she slowly made her way down the hall. She was almost to the bathroom when a slightly nauseating smell wafted from the kitchen. The sounds of dishes clinking made her smile. She passed the bathroom and leaned heavily against the doorframe to the kitchen.

Kakashi's kitchen was barely a kitchen; the walls and the tiles were off white, though she thought a bit of elbow grease would make both shine white. It didn't have an oven; only a stove top. Kakashi looked like a giant next to his small fridge, which was rarely stocked with anything besides eggs and milk. His small pantry was filled with rice, noodles, and eggplant.

Kakashi stood at the stovetop in a pair of dark sweatpants that sat low on his waist. He wore a skin tight navy tank top, his mask up over the bridge of his nose.

Sakura smiled as he moved the eggs around in the pan. It was rare that he was up before her; and it was usually her cooking in her kitchen since he rarely brought her here. Watching him made a warmth spread through her chest. Her mind drifted; perhaps to her apartment, he stood there, maybe without the mask, cooking for them both. For a child. A silver haired, green-eyed boy-

Sakura's mind froze. Her throat tightened. She shook her head, exhaling. She swallowed, blinking back the tears and the thought.

A life that can never be.

And it was Sasuke's fault.

"So what was the occasion?" he said, with a flick of his wrist, making the eggs in the saucepan flip. He eyed her. "You're not usually one to go out drinking with Ino."

Sakura nodded, "Or at noon."

He shrugged eyes still on the eggs. "It happens." She watched as he turned off the burners, sliding the food onto plates. He balanced the plates on his arm, bee-lining for the fridge, and pulling out the milk. He gestured for her to follow him into the living room. He placed the plates on the small table in the middle of the room. He sat gracefully

on the floor.

She followed him, her stomach tying in knots. “It was in celebration that the search for the baby maker for the future Uchiha clan is over. Instead of waiting around to be carted off, we decided to get drunk.” Sakura sat opposite of him. She grabbed her fork and took a bite.

It was delicious.

She instantly felt more awake and less hungover. She watched him eat, far less gracefully than he did with the mask on. She smiled, feeling a blush reach her cheeks. Only Hatake Kakashi could make eating breakfast after a binge seem intimate.

His jaw was square and defined. His nose was round at the tip; probably his one feature he got from his mother. She bit her lip, going back to her food. *Times like this would probably be rare soon.* A part of her mind screamed *yes* but a small, hopeful voice whispered *no!* Before she could become a blubbering mess, she forced herself to eat. When she was done, she looked up at him.

Kakashi was leaning back on his hands, his right knee pulled in as he stared at the wall. His head was tilted to the side, his silver locks flopped lazily to the side. His gaze was distant, his brows knitted and his lips parted slightly.

Warmth spread to her toes as her stomach did a small flop.

He really is beautiful.

He blinked back to focus, his eyes moving to her. A smile ghosted his lips. She thought was going to say something as her stomach erupted into butterflies, but he just rose to his feet gracefully, grabbing the plates and walked past her. She inhaled, feeling slightly light headed at his scent as he passed; he smelled of grass, dog, and a special scent that was only Kakashi. She listened to him in the kitchen; the running water, the dishes clinking as he cleaned them. Her throat tightened as she gripped her forearm. She tried to push the images that flashed in her mind down; of a different apartment-maybe a house. With a big kitchen. With a large, bright bedroom. Just one the two of them would share.

Together.

She struggled to breath as she tried to keep the dam from breaking. She pulled her knees into her chest and focused on her breath.

She felt his arms encircle her. He pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

“Please don’t cry Sakura.” His bare lips brushed against the crook of her neck.

She bit her lip as she inhaled deeply. He pulled her back against him and pushed her chin towards him, capturing her lips.

It was unlike any kiss before. Her body trembled as she turned. She cupped his face as he deepened the kiss. He rose from the floor, pulling her with him. She felt him guide her back to the bedroom. He sat her on the bed, kissing her again. Time stood still as his tongue swiped her bottom lip. She gave him access as he gently laid her down on the bed.

Her mind raced. It screamed. Her heart squeezed painfully as she added an urgency to his kiss.

It had to be urgent. They didn’t have much time. I won’t be his much longer.

“Stop thinking, Sakura,” he chided, pulling back. He had a small smile on his lips, but his gray eye swam with an emotion that she wouldn’t place. *It is too late to place it.* He kissed her gently. “For now, don’t think about any of that. It’s just you and me.”

She nodded. She pulled him back into her and they fell into the bed. His fingers trailed up her side, making her shiver. He grabbed the hem of his shirt that she wore, ripping it over her head, making her forget everything but him.

III

Thunder echoed outside when she got the news. It hadn’t stopped raining for the three days since. She didn’t think it ever would.

Her body ached. Her head pulsed.

At the sound of a quick rapping at the door, it took almost everything in her to pull herself off the couch. To drag her feet to the door. As she grabbed the handle, she hesitated.

Kakashi never knocked on the door. He always let herself in.

But everything is different now. It hadn’t been the last time she had seen him; that had been a week ago. When they were pretending.

Her eyes filled with stung as her lungs burned. Her fingers trembled as she gripped the door, swinging it open.

Her heart twisted as fresh tears welled in her eyes.

Kakashi's visible eye was sunken, and glossy. The red veins shone brightly in contrast to the dark circles under his eyes. He stood straight as a board, fist clenching and unclenching. He was pale, his chest heaving, voice strained as he spoke softly, "Tsunade-sama told me…"

She broke eye contact, blinking back the tears and stepping aside, opening her door wider. When she felt him walk past, she closed the door, securing the lock with a loud *thatch* .

She walked through the hall to the living room, watching Kakashi stand in the middle of it; he looked like a lost puppy.

Like he didn't know what to do anymore.

After a few baited moments, he looked back at her, studying her before tentatively moving to the couch. He collapsed, ripping his mask off. He buried his head in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. She watched with a tilted head as he took a heavy breath, his shoulders shaking. Neither of them spoke as the thunder rumbled around them.

Eventually, he leaned back, his head lolling off the edge as he spread himself over it more. He looked like he'd just come back from a year long mission instead of a week.

Then she watched as he did as he usually did after a long mission; he ran his hands through his hair before they came to his shoulders and pulled off his wet shirt and flak jacket all at once. He slowly unfurled on the couch, lying long ways across it, his hand came to cover his eyes as one leg splayed off the side and the other jutted off the arm rest.

She smiled at the normalcy. As she towards him, she felt something unfurl in her chest as she did what she always did. Her hands glowed as she knelt next to him, her hands running across his chest. He wasn't very injured; her chakra healed the small tears, cuts, and bruises as he lay silently, breathing deeply.

"They chose you," his voice was hoarse. His arm that covered his eyes fell with a small thunk on the floor beside her.

She hummed, not trusting herself to speak. As she finished healing him, she pulled her hands back to her lap, wringing them in her lap.

They sat in silence.

She bit her lip, “I’m-”

“You’re not sorry,” he whispered, reading her mind. She looked up to him and saw his Sharingan eye looking at her. “You did nothing to be sorry about. We talked about this happening. We *knew* this was going to happen.”

“We didn’t know-”

“Who else would they choose, Sakura?” he said softly, “You are smart, beautiful, the most qualified. And you’ve spent the most time with Sasuke.” He said bitterly. Sakura didn’t say anything. Kakashi lifted his head, his arm moved from the floor to her hair, sifting through it. She leaned into him.

“I’m going to accept.” Sakura whispered.

“Naruto wouldn’t want it to be like this-”

“You’re right.” She shook her head. “But this is what he deserves.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Tsunade told him that she planned on stepping down after…” *the wedding* . She inhaled deeply. “Naruto’s *so* happy.” Her voice was strained. She closed her eyes. “And-and it won’t be that bad. I can do this.” She opened her eyes, his mismatched eyes were glossy.

“We’ll have to stop.” Her voice was tight. He didn’t wince but it was like she slapped him.

After a moment, he nodded. “Prolonging it will only make it worse.”

She swallowed. “You’ll-you’ll still be here for me? I-I know it won’t be the same and not what-” For an instant, she saw it; the grimace in the corner of his eye. The hate. The fear. But then it was gone. She forced herself to not shake. To stop crying. She inhaled deeply, “I need you on my side for this. We can’t-can’t be what we’ve been…but I need you-” his hand cupped her face, brushing a tear away. She cursed herself.

His gaze was intense, but she refused to look away. “Always. I’ll always be here for you. In any way I can.” All the words he’d never

said echoed in her living room.

All the words she never said to him died in her throat. Regret filled her soul. “I know.” She nodded, taking a deep breath. “I know.”

“Sakura-”

She stared at him, breathing heavily before she frantically nodded her head, unable to stop the sobs that erupted from her. “I-I know!” she pressed into his hand. “I know.” Before she knew what was happening, she was pulled into the couch, and wrapped in his arms. “But I have you tonight,” he whispered, pulling down his mask, kissing her deeply.

Tonight. She grabbed his shirt, pulling him closer. Tonight Kakashi would be hers. Who knew about tomorrow.

Sakura pushed that thought away as she focused on him, on *them* , for tonight. She ignored the clock that was now ticking in her head.

She had *two years* .

They better make the most of it.

Awkward Dinners

She was training with Sai, punching her way through an inky tiger when she saw Sasuke again.

Sai noticed him first, stopping mid strike and glancing over at the entrance to the training ground. He gave a grand wave. “Hello, Traitor!” He waved. Saskue stopped, glaring at Sai before crossing his arms in a pout. Sakura pressed her lips together, biting back a smile as she turned towards him.

It wasn’t hard once she saw the scowl on his face.

She sucked her teeth, standing straight. She adjusted her gloves as Sai came to stand next to her. Together they moved towards Sasuke. As they stopped in front of him, Sasuke’s dark eyes moved from her to Sai. His scowl deepened. “Do you mind? I have business with her.”

Sai’s smile widened, “Of course not, I understand how these courting rituals work. I’ve read about them in a book.” Sai looked to her, his eyes closing in a smile, “It will be nice to see it in a practical application.” He turned his attention back to Sasuke, gesturing between Sakura and Sasuke. “You must prove your worth to the woman by treating her like a queen.”

It’s nice to see his sarcasm has gotten better. Sai’s smile softened, “Would you like me to coach you? I have the chapter memorized.”

Before Sasuke’s eyes blinked to red, Sakura held up her hand. “It’s fine, Sai. Thank you”

“Or at least that is what I’ve observed with Naruto and Hinata. The golden couple as it were. He treats her with such respect.” Sai was laying it on too thick, but Sakura almost laughed at Saskue’s reaction. Sai gave her one last look before he walked to the edge of the clearing. Sakura and Sasuke watched as he leaned against a tree and pulled out a small sketchbook.

Sakura’s attention moved back to Sasuke, who stared at him for a few minutes. “I don’t like him.”

Sakura shrugged, “Tough.” She put her hands on her hips. “He’s my teammate and you have to get used to him.”

He watched her hands before glancing back up at her face, “I don’t have to do anything like that.”

She sighed, “You’re right. You just need to stay away from Team Kakashi all together.” She stood straighter, hoping to look intimidating. He didn’t seem affected.

“Listen, Sakura. I understand that this isn’t the best situation for you, but you need to get used to it. We have two years to get to know each other and adapt to this-”

“This must be *painful* for you.” She drawled. She swallowed thickly. *This wasn’t fair* . Especially since she hadn’t seen Kakashi since that night of the thunderstorms. “Having deserted the village to come back and get what you want.”

“Sakura, this isn’t what-”

“Don’t lie to me, Uchiha.” She poked him in the chest, he staggered back. “You may act like this isn’t what you wanted,” he stood straight, his scowl deepening. “You might have told the Elders some sob story-” she stopped at the small smile on Sasuke’s lips.

“I came back because I do need to revive my clan and I knew the village would only take me back for that reason. Do I want it to be *you* ?” He tilted his head, “not particularly.” Sakura felt like she had been punched in the gut. Sasuke shrugged, his voice lowering. “But I won’t say I’m not relieved.” She glowered. He didn’t back down. “What I told the Elders was true; I thought you would be the one kunoichi, if any, to give me the shot I don’t really deserve. Because you are kind. And forgiving.” Sakura felt her resolve slip as he tentatively took her hand. “I am sorry,” He whispered. Sakura swallowed thickly at his unwavering gaze. “I hope we can make the best of it.”

Sakura watched him, her heart strings tugging. She sighed, slipping her hand out of his. She crossed her arms. “I don’t really have a choice.”

“Let’s start small. Dinner?”

She sucked on her teeth, “Sure.”

Sasuke looked back at Sai, who was still sketching. Sasuke huffed, turning back to Sakura. It seemed that there was something else he wanted to say, but thought better of it and turned and left the grounds. Sakura watched as Sai made his way across the field. “Did he

woo you?"

"I can't help but feel like something isn't right here."

"You should go with your gut." Sakura looked back at Sai, who was placing his sketch pad away. He looked back at her seriously, "But you are correct. The council wants his eyes. Or his broods eyes.

"Eyes that will do what they want." Something crossed the Ex-Root's face. "Be careful, Ugly."

Sakura nodded. She readjusted her gloves. "Let's go back to it."

III

Dinner was awkward.

Sakura sat across from Sasuke while he stared at his plate. No matter how hard she tried to start a conversation, he didn't seem like he wanted to talk.

He just…stared.

Sakura tried to ignore it as she filled the empty space between them with the rehashing of the end of her and Sai's sparring match. Of something that she and Naruto had done the day before. Of anything that was inconsequential and not having to do with Kakashi.

She couldn't talk about Kakashi.

Not like any of that mattered. Sasuke didn't react to anything that she said.

What made it more awkward was everyone staring at them. The people at the tables, the dining staff- *everyone* gawked at the sight of Konoha's new number one couple. Until Konoha's former number one couple came barging in (or only one came barging in, the other was more quiet and timid.)

Sakura stopped in mid-sentence as Naruto almost tripped over himself pulling the chair out for Hinata, pushing her in too close to the table, making the table move slightly.Hinata's eyes widened. She seemed a bit short winded, but smiled at him as she gave herself some breathing room.

Sakura felt a lump form in her stomach.

Sasuke turned to Naruto and Hinata, who were staring whimsically into each other's eyes as the waiter stood trying to get their attention. Sakura couldn't help but smile. They were happy.

Sasuke scoffed, "That's entirely unnecessary." Sakura turned back to their table as Sasuke went back to his food.

"It's cute. They're in love and you should be happy for them. It's what Naruto deserves."

Sasuke shrugged.

She looked back; Naruto looked from Hinata to the server, knocking over a glass of water. She couldn't help the laughter that bubbled in her chest as Naruto rubbed the back of his neck. She glanced back at Sasuke who was scowling. "He's the next Hokage?"

"He's not usually like this." She said softly, picking at her food. "When it's just the Konoha Eleven, he's more at ease. But in public and he's trying to impress and show the village he can take care of her, he is more nervous."

Sasuke nodded. They went back to silence, albeit less awkward.

"You said 'Konoha Eleven.'"

"Our Rookie Team. Plus Sai. He wasn't part of the initial group, but he's found his place among us."

Sasuke pulled his shoulders back. His lip curled. His brows knitted together angrily as he jabbed at his food.

This, apparently, was the wrong thing to say.

Sakura felt sick to her stomach as silence settled between them again.

III

To make the night even worse, Sasuke walked her home (in silence) and invited himself into her home (she noted Sai sitting at his perch on her roof, waving). Sai dropped down in front of her as Sasuke stalked into her living room.

Sai removed his mask and opened his mouth but was cut off when Sasuke made a strangled noise. Sakura shoved Sai out of the way to see Sasuke standing over a large form on her couch and the smell of blood filled the air.

Sakura blinked when she saw silver hair. “Damnit, Kakashi.” She shoved past Sasuke. kneeling dropping to her knees next to the couch.

Kakashi was pale, his breathing ragged as he gripped his shoulder.

Sakura didn’t bother looking back, “Sasuke, I have to take care of this. Leave.” She barely heard him make a small noise before turning, leaving the apartment.

As soon as the door closed, Kakashi’s breath returned to normal and he physically relaxed. He opened his eyes and tsked. “Inviting a boy home on the first date? Sakura, I didn’t know you were that kind of-”

“Shove it.” She snarled, pushing her finger into the gash in his shoulder, making him wince. “Being a bit of a drama queen to make Sasuke leave? Please tell me you didn’t do it yourself.”

He shrugged, “I thought you would thank me.”

She didn’t say anything as she removed her fingers and began healing it. “It wasn’t too bad.” Kakashi’s lone eye didn’t seem impressed. “He spoke to me.”

“How many words?” Kakashi sounded impressed.

Sakura lifted her chin, “About twenty. Until I mentioned Konoha eleven.”

They were silent for a few moments before he Kakashi spoke, “You know, no one calls you all that.”

“I know. I think it was Naruto that came up with it.”

“It hurts Sai’s feelings.”

“Sai doesn’t really have feelings.”

“He’s learning. If he did have them, he’d be hurt.”

She smiled. “Sai’s just happy to have a place he belongs.”

“Not in Konoha eleven. You could at least up the number to twelve.”

She smacked him lightly as her green Chakra faded. “On Team Kakashi.” He closed his eyes as she stood up. She walked in the kitchen, pulling out her secret stash of sake and two cups before heading back into the living room. Kakashi had sat up, leaning against

armrest. He had pulled his mask down and removed his hiate. He rubbed his sharingan eye.

Sakura realized something was missing. She looked down at the bottle and cups. “I need a new coffee table.” He looked up at her and gave two eye crinkles.

“You do.” He took the cups and the bottle from her. “I’ll buy you one as a wedding gift.” She collapsed on the floor next to the couch. She pressed her back against it. He plucked the sake and the cups from her fingers. She leaned her head back, watching him carefully pour before holding the small cup out to her. She took it and waited as he filled the other. They raised their glasses slightly before drinking. Sakura downed her quickly before watching Kakashi take a small sip.

“Was your date as dreamy as you always thought a date with Sasuke would be?” Kakashi asked softy, filling up her cup again.

She nodded. “Very romantic.” She sipped her sake this time. “Awkward silence and everything.”

“No declarations of love?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure that will come on the second date.”

“It usually does.”

A tense silence fell between them.

Kakashi placed an almost empty bottle on the ground before he stood. He didn’t stagger or stumble as he bent over to pick up his Hiate, shoving it in his pocket. He looked down at her before giving her another eye crinkle. He held out his hand, which she took immediately. “Things will work out. You just need to give him time.” He pulled her to her feet.

Kakashi’s eyes searched her face. She felt *something* shift between them. Kakashi squeezed her hand and then slipped away.

“Good-bye, Sakura.” He gave her a small smile before turning towards the door.

She nodded, watching him pull up his mask. “Bye, Kakashi.” She whispered as the front door clicked softly behind him.

Massages and Threats

“Don’t you have work?”

“Don’t you have ‘Sasuke guarding duty?’” Sakura ignored the moaning man beneath her as she watched Sai shrug and continue to sketch. He had been sitting on her couch as she massaged (or more like attacked) an inflamed and pinched nerve in Naruto’s shoulder.

“Is he going to return the favor?” Sai inquired, not looking up from his sketch. The pink haired woman grunted as she forced her super strengthened chakra into her thumb, pushing hard on the nerve, feeling it loosen and relax under her touch. For someone who trained hours on end, everyday, Naruto had ridiculously smooth skin. *Why can’t I have skin like this* ?! Sakura blew a hair out of her eyes as she looked up at Sai, who was watching her. “As friends, aren’t I supposed to help you out of bad situations?”

She raised a brow as Naruto sighed in relief. “Sakura-chan, please teach Hinata your ultra secret massaging technique.”

She rolled her eyes before putting her attention back on Sai. “If you want a massage by Naruto, I’ll prepare the ice pack.” Sakura smiled, thinking back to the last time Naruto had given her a massage: Shizune had to work on her back for three hours afterwards.

Sai froze. “Good point.”

“Hey! Hinata says she loves my back massages!”

Sakura rolled her eyes, smacking Naruto on the back. Naruto whined.

Sai opened his mouth, but paused. He looked towards the door.

Before she could move, the door opened and dread filled her.

Sasuke poked his head in, a brow arching. “What is going on in here? Why do you leave your door unlocked?”

Sakura looked down at her straddling Naruto’s back, her hands splayed across his tan skin. Naruto gave a cheeky grin. “Sakura-chan’s rubbing me down with her magic fingers.”

Sakura grabbed the back of his shoulder blades, pushing her pointer finger on a pressure point, making Naruto convulse underneath her.

“Stop, Sakura-chan!”

She laughed, trying to relax. She continued her ministrations, poking the pressure points in his back and neck, trying to ignore Sasuke as he made his way further into her apartment.

She released Naruto, who was completely still for a moment before quickly turning underneath her and pinning her on her back. The apartment rumbled. His fox light grin showed off his white teeth as his hands held her arms pinned to her side. She wrapped her legs around his waist and sent short spurts of chakra through her feet, making him jerk slightly. He grunted as he moved to put both of her hands in one of his hands over her head and before his free hand could do anything, she moved her hips, pulling a leg over Naruto’s head, putting him in a submission hold. He squawked and laughed. She couldn’t help but laugh with him.

“It’s a good thing the coffee table is gone.” Sai said thoughtfully, not looking away from Sasuke. “You’ve done one good thing at least, Traitor.”

Sakura looked up at Sasuke who was frowning, looking almost angry.

She was distracted enough for Naruto to tickle her. She twitched and fell back, giving Naruto the opportunity to wiggle free. Instead of pouncing on her, he rolled back, his eyes briefly looking at the now angry looking Sasuke, his smile only faltering slightly. “You won’t get me again, Sakura-chan!” He stretched. He looked up at Sasuke and grinned, “You can tickle the bear to escape, but you don’t want to poke it.” He laughed, “I’m not dumb enough to fall into that trap again!”

“You are dumb enough, Dickless.” Sai said, eyes still on Sasuke.

Naruto’s face reddened, “I’m not-!”

“This would not be the second or third time you’ve fallen for it.” Sai put his sketchbook on the couch and moved towards Sakura. “And since you are all thumbs, I will assist Sakura in relieving the tension in her shoulders that makes her stand like an eighty year old woman.” Sakura opened her mouth, but paused at the strange new smile on Sai’s lips. Sai knelt down next to her, his hand moving to her shoulder. Sai’s eyes flickered towards Sasuke and Sakura watched as Sasuke’s fingers clenched. Before Sai could get any closer, Sasuke moved. But Sai was quicker; he was on his feet and a kunai to Sasuke’s throat before Sakura could blink.

“Hey! This is Sakura’s house! We don’t poke each other with kunai!” Naruto yelled loudly. The anger in Sasuke’s eyes was a big contrast to Sai’s smile.

“Do not touch Sakura.” Sasuke’s eyes flashed red.

Sai didn’t flinch, “I would say the same to you.”

“I am her fiancé.”

Sai only smiled before looking at Sakura, “Would you like the Traitor to give you a back massage? Or would you rather someone you like do it?”

Sakura sighed, standing up, “Let him go, Sai.” Sai hesitated before letting him go. Sasuke pivoted to swing but Sakura caught his hand.

“This is *my* house.” Sakura’s tone was dark as she squeezed Sasuke’s hands. “Take it outside if you have a problem, but he’s *our* teammate. You mess with him, you mess with us, no matter what the Elders say.” Sasuke froze. After a few moments, she released his hand and he straightened. She sighed, “Now, you are here for something?”

He didn’t speak, he only stared.

She sighed. She needed a stiff drink. “I’ll meet up with you guys later.” She herded her boys to the door.

“How about lunch in about an hour, Sakura-chan?” Naruto looked at Sasuke wearily before smiling at her, “For the back massage?” She relaxed slightly and smiled.

“I’ll meet you at Ichiraku’s in an hour.”

She all but pushed them out the door.

She turned back to Sasuke, hands on her hips. “What was it that you needed to talk about in private?”

Sasuke did something unexpected.

He flushed.

He looked at the corner of the couch. “I was going to ask you to accompany me to lunch.” He said softly.

“Oh…” Heat crept up her neck as they stood in an awkward silence.

“You can come with us-”

“It would be better alone.” He said shortly. He inhaled, pulling his shoulders back. “We need to get to know each other better if we are to be married, Sakura.” Sasuke stated matter-of-factly. The thought of marriage made her stomach curl but she stood there. “Just once a week. For now.”

Sakura exhaled, but nodded. “I have rotations at the hospital coming up. We can go then.”

Sasuke studied her for a moment before nodding. “We can discuss it later.” And with that, he brushed past her towards the door.

She watched him leave, sensing Sai as he jumped off the roof.

“Did you know he was coming?”

Sai shook his head, “It was my day off.”

“How long is ANBU going to watch him?”

“As long as the Hokage deems it is necessary.”

She nodded; she turned to go back inside. “What do you have against Sasuke? I mean, really?” She looked back, Sai was still watching Sasuke, there was a strange look on his face.

Sadness. It wasn’t often Sai showed anything besides his fake smile.

“Sakura, I asked earlier if friends are supposed to help their friends out in bad situations.” Sakura nodded. He smiled, “This situation with Sasuke is a bad situation. It does not take someone with a lot of experience with people to understand that. Even Naruto gets it.”

She nodded. She had noticed that Naruto did not spend as much time with Sasuke as she had expected him to. Was it because of her?

“I volunteered to watch Sasuke in case he tried something. I do not understand the relationship you and Sasuke and Naruto share.” He touched her shoulder lightly, “But I understand our bond. I will do my best to protect you. You’re very ugly when you’re sad, Ugly.”

Sakura smiled, “Thank you, but I don’t need your protection, Sai.”

Sai shrugged. “Perhaps not. But nonetheless, I will be here, as much as I can.” He smiled brightly. It was one of his true smiles.“Have a good

afternoon."

"You too, Sai."

III

"Have you seen Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto asked with a mouth full of noodles.

Sakura felt her heart twist. "Not in three weeks." He was avoiding her.

He looked at her thoughtfully, "I saw him a few days ago, but I think he was going out on another mission with Gai or Genma." He grinned, "I demanded that he put Team Kakashi on the list for missions!" *Before it's too late…* She smiled at his enthusiasm before taking a large bite of noodles. "So, what did Sasuke want?"

She shrugged, "Making lunch dates. Once a week." She focused on her noodles.

"I know this is going to sound…like me being an ass." Naruto had a frown deeply etched on his face. "But you have to give Sasuke a chance." Sakura's throat closed up. "I know-this isn't-" he paused. He leaned into her, "Sakura," his blue eyes were glossy, "Sakura, I didn't mean for any of this to happen." His hand was on her arm, squeezing it softly, "If I would have known I wouldn't have brought him back-"

"It's okay Naruto, it's not your fault." She exhaled with a grimace, "it's just-a lot has been going on." Kakashi was ignoring her. Avoiding her. Because they couldn't be what they wanted anymore. She had used more leave from the hospital in the past three weeks than she had in the last three years. She'd been sticking close to her apartment or staying with Ino.

And now with Sasuke constantly looking over her or loitering around her apartment, she couldn't stand the idea of running into Kakashi. What if Kakashi saw her with Sasuke? What would *she* do if she saw Kakashi while with Sasuke?

But Naruto was right, she needed to give Sasuke a chance. She was angry. Angry at Sasuke. Angry at the council.

Angry at herself. She should have made more of the time she had with Kakashi.

She just wanted life to get back to normal. But it never would.

“Sakura?”

Sakura blinked, rubbing her face, “you’re right. I’ll try harder.” She inhaled, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Maybe once we start back on missions, I’ll feel better. Get back into a routine.”

He grinned, downing the rest of his bowl. “Let’s go train!”

He slammed down money, pulling her out of the stand, “Naruto! We just ate!”

She couldn’t help the smile on her face.

III

It was two days later when she went back to work at the hospital. She started picking up extra shifts as she worked with Naruto and Sai on a training regime. It was three days after that she got the message.

Team Kakashi had a mission.

It wasn’t awkward seeing Kakashi again. Or working with him. Kakashi had always been able to compartmentalize. She didn’t take it personally. There was just…a rift. A space between them that had once been filled with… *them* …was gone.

They were just…teammates again.

Perhaps it’s for the best. She thought as she walked next to Naruto as he babbled about special Hokage training. *Now I can focus on getting to know Sasuke better. I can give Sasuke the proper chance. He didn’t necessarily want this. With me…* She glanced over to see Kakashi’s slumped back, orange book between his nose. She smiled sadly. *It’s for the best.*

Or that’s what she kept telling herself anyway.

And So Things Return to Normal

Life returned to normal.

Sakura focused on work, going in at dawn, leaving at dusk, only being at her apartment long enough to shower and change before going out with Ino or Naruto and Hinata, or simply going to the bar by herself. She wasn't necessarily working harder; she usually locked herself in her office reading or doing puzzles. And rarely drinking when she went out to the bar by herself. Just being around large crowds made her more comfortable. Less alone.

Sasuke wouldn't seek her out in crowds like this.

But tonight was different. Tonight she sat at the bar drinking a cherry something with more alcohol than cherry. She mulled it over in her mind.

Sasuke had paused in her apartment. She smirked. *Maybe he's scared of me* . She frowned. *More like he knows he can't just barrel in, snakes flying and Chidori out. This is Konoha. Even Sasuke wouldn't be that stupid.* She sighed, taking a long drink.

"You might want to slow down." A soft voice whispered in her ear. A familiar presence filled the seat to her left, leaning in close. "I hear that stuff is terrible for the baby."

"Ha, ha." Sakura downed the rest of her drink, motioning for the bartender to bring her another, ignoring the butterflies in her stomach. She turned to face him, "That is not funny, Kakashi."

Kakashi shrugged, pulling his hand out of his pockets, calling the bartender over. A small box slid from his hand as he raised it. She caught it, covering it with her hand before the bartender came over.

Sakura felt the box for clues of its content. Her brow rose at the velvet feel that held almost no weight in her hand. She glanced at Kakashi, thanking the bartender as he brought both their drinks; hers a cherry something and his dark beer. "I hope this isn't another key."

"That," Kakashi took a large gulp, "Was the key to my heart."

She rolled her eyes. "It was to your apartment to water your plants."

"And you never locked it back." He said lightly. "And the plants all

died."

"It was never locked in the first place." Her eyes narrowed, "and your plants are all fake."

He sat face forwards with his beer to his masked lips, looking lazily at her from the side. "And yet…"

She couldn't help herself; she laughed.

Her shoulders relaxed as she felt the knot in her stomach she didn't realize was there fade away.

"I didn't realize my heart was so humorous."

She wiped away a tear. "You're a lot of things, Kakashi." She took a deep breath, turning to face him. He was smiling under his mask. Pain shot through her chest. She had missed this. Missed him. "So…" she picked up her drink in a sweeping motion, taking a small sip, "You've been scarce lately."

"Mission." He said calmly, taking a sip from his own drink, looking straight ahead. "You still haven't opened it."

"You get this on a mission?" she said, opening the box under the bar.

"No, down the street."

She snorted as the box popped open. Inside was a silver necklace that had a small gemstone that was the same color as her hair. "Kakashi…"

He shrugged, "It was in the window. I thought you would like it. Tsunade had something like it, but she gave it Naruto." Kakashi took another drink, motioning the bartender for another one.

Sakura tried to repress her smile. "Do you want me to give it to you?"

He shook his head, "It wouldn't go well with my eye."

She grasped his hand. "Thank you, Kakashi." She felt a tear well in her eye. "It's beautiful."

Kakashi shrugged. "You seemed like you needed something to bring the light back in your eyes." She swallowed the lump in her throat, reluctantly letting go of his hand, picking up her drink and taking another sip. "And a peace offering." She looked over to him and smiled.

“Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”

“That’s not a diamond, Sakura.”

She sighed, “I know.”

They fell into a comfortable silence.

“So…” Kakashi said nonchalantly, “How’s things?”

She ignored the way his voice raised at ‘things.’ She nodded. “They’re good. At the hospital I had a kid that somehow lodged a kunai in his shoulder. Ino is about three more binge nights from sleeping with Chouji and I still haven’t replaced my coffee table.” She took another gulp, almost finishing her drink.

“And...”

She did finish her drink, feeling the warmth finally reach her toes, “And Sasuke has started taking me to lunch once a week at a quiet café and we sit quietly. Sometimes we talk about inconsequential things. The weather mainly.” She sighed before calling the bartender over for the check, “it could be worse, I guess.”

“Once a week.” He mused, “I had figured he’d already had moved in. It’s been what…four months?”

Sakura nodded, “He stopped making unexpected house calls after a run in with Sai and me.” Kakashi’s lone eyebrow was raised, but she shrugged it off. “Sai has my back.” She saw Kakashi physically relax. “But I'm worried,”she looked down at her half empty glass, “something’s not right…”

Kakashi snorted.

“No,” she picked up the necklace and undid the clasp. “He’s too…not Sasuke. Too Timid. Until he gets angry…”

“Like a snake coiling before it strikes.” Kakashi said quietly to his drink. He shook his head, he looked down at Sakura with his usual smile, “Or maybe he doesn’t know what to say in front of a pretty girl he's trying to impress.” Kakashi leaned over her, reaching behind her and clasping the necklace. She inhaled his familiar scent before he slowly backed away. He looked down as the gem. He gave her a small smile. “I knew I had great taste.”

She rolled her eyes, taking a small sip to hide her smile.

They sat for a few moments in content silence before Sakura's mind went back to Sasuke. Her eyes drifted back to Kakashi. His back was hunched, his eye distant.

Why did things have to turn out this way? We have-had this 'thing.' I want to keep my thing. Why does-Just because Sasuke comes back I have to completely drop my whole life.

I want to be with Kakashi. She felt her throat tighten. *It's-a little less than two years but…But betraying Uchiha Sasuke is never the smartest thing…*

And despite her better judgment, she leaned into him. "I've missed you."

Kakashi moved. He downed the rest of his drink faster than Sakura could blink, digging in his pocket and pulling out money, slamming it down on the bar. He rose to his feet, grabbing Sakura by the arm gently, pulling her towards the door. As they left the bar, Sakura heard Kakashi's voice get lost in the wind.

"I've missed you too."

III

The following morning Sakura dashed out of Kakashi's apartment, racing across the rooftops to her house to grab a fresh change of clothes and a shower before heading towards the hospital.

Her lunches with Sasuke went from once a week to three, but they seemed more tolerable when she would leave the hospital after her shift and head to Kakashi's apartment.

And the missions were coming in once a week.

Naruto laughed, saying Tsunade was trying to get what she could out of her best ninja before he became Hokage. But Sakura felt there was something underneath his words, but didn't mention it.

III

"How was your mission?" Sasuke asked on their way back from lunch.

Sakura was surprised how much easier it was to smile around Sasuke, "It was good. A little boring, capture the bad guys before they left the

Fire Country. Sai was able to trap them quickly from escaping while Naruto, Kakashi and I beat them to a pulp." *I did most of the pulp beating…Kakashi and Naruto did a regular beating.*

Sasuke's face twitched, which made her smile fall off her face. "You seem to be in better spirits since Team Kakashi started back on their missions." His soft tone unnerved her.

It wasn't just the missions that had her in better spirits. "Well of course, it's my team. Part of it anyway. There's also Yamato-sempai - he covers when one of us is not available, mainly when Kakashi-sensei's incapacitated, or I'm needed at the hospital. But now that Naruto is going through the Hokage training with Tsunade, Yamato-sempai takes Naruto's spot on the team more so than Kakashi's. Usually the only two constants on the team are Sai and I." Sasuke's face fell. She smirked; Sasuke hated Sai so much.

"Is that where you were all night? Still on the mission?" Sakura felt like she was doused in ice water. "I thought I heard you all got back early in the afternoon but perhaps I heard wrong."

"Heard wrong?"

Sasuke nodded, "I went by your house last night and you weren't there." He turned to her, standing taller than she remembered him being, "I thought we could go out to dinner and talk more."

Sakura stood as tall as she could, but still felt small next to him. "I went out to eat with Sai," *and then went to Kakashi's…*

Sasuke turned back around, walking with a straight back. "I don't trust this Sai."

"I'm sure the feeling is mutual." They were almost to the hospital when Sasuke spoke again. She almost didn't hear it. "You're not sleeping with him are you?"

Sakura blinked. "Sleeping? With…Sai?" she asked cautiously as her heart hammered in her chest. When Sasuke didn't say anything, her mind blanked before she burst out laughing, almost head butting him as she ungracefully doubled over.

She wiped her eyes, struggling to stand up right. Sasuke looked displeased, his face serious and a small pout on his lips.

She doubled over again. "That is the stupidest thing-" Sakura froze at

the pain grip on her wrist. Sasuke yanked her roughly to her feet. His eyes flashed red before releasing her.

Without saying anything else, he walked away, leaving her stunned in the road. She looked down slowly at her arm. A bright red hand print glowed against her pale skin. She looked back to Sasuke's retreating form. "What the hell…"

III

Oh my god Sakura! You need to tell Tsunade or someone…" Ino delicately cradled Sakura's arm before healing it. "This is all over the fact that you laughed at him?"

Sakura nodded. Instead of going back to the hospital, she mindlessly walked the village. When she came back to her senses, she was in front of the Yamanaka Flower Shop.

Ino took one look at her arm and dragged her in the back.

"He thought I was sleeping with Sai." she said in a far off voice.

Ino looked incredulously at her. "Sai?"

"Sai."

Ino blanched. "Sai? No emotions Sai?"

"Well…" Sakura said, tugging her arm out of her friend's grasp, "He's learning…"

"Don't defend him!" Ino crossed her arms. "Really? Sai?!"

"It would have been more believable if it was Naruto." Or Kakashi.

"Or Gai-sensei…" Ino leaned up against a stack of boxes, shuddering slightly at her mental image. "So, Sasuke is the jealous type."

"Jealous of Sai."

"Of Sai." They were silent for a moment before Ino spoke softly. "Are you sleeping with someone?"

"Not Sai." Sakura said coldly.

Ino threw up her hands. "I know, I know! It's some big secret because I can't keep my mouth shut at times…" her face grew serious,

“whoever it is, you need to break it off.” Sakura felt a stab of pain through her chest. She had just got Kakashi back.

Ino seemed to read her mind, “especially after today! If Sasuke found out, even though you aren’t even really ‘together,’” Ino shook her head. “And he will find out. He has nothing better to do…” she said dejectedly, “he can't leave the village.”

Sakura stared at her arm. Being with Kakashi made her feel alive. Made her feel in control of her life.

Feel loved.

Just being next to him was comforting. “I’ll be fine, Ino.” She looked up to her friend, “I-I don’t have a lot of time to myself anymore. To be myself.” She took a shaky breath, “This is the one thing that I have that’s *mine* . At least for a little while.”

“Then run away together!” Ino said a little louder than she probably meant.

Sakura rolled her eyes. “You know I can't do that,”

Ino sighed, walking towards the front of the shop. “Far more romantic than becoming Sasuke’s baby maker.”

Sakura wanted to laugh but the invisible burn on her arm still ached.

III

Before she made it to the hospital, Kakashi found her.

They had another mission.

Sakura was grateful for the distraction. But as they walked, Kakashi's hand brushed hers and she stepped away, Ino’s warning ringing in her head

III

Sai, Naruto, and Sakura sat around a campfire in the middle of the forest while Kakashi sat a few feet away, reading his book.

Naruto burst out laughing. “Sai?!” Naruto looked at Sai and doubled over, laughing.

Sai smiled, “I’m honored.”

The only one who didn't say anything was Kakashi. Naruto had composed himself enough to snicker. "Who's he going to say next!? Bushy-eyebrows!?"

"Ino was thinking Gai-sensei…" Sakura mumbled, sending Naruto in another fit of giggles.

"Or both." Naruto cackled again. The image of the two beasts smiling in unison in their green spandex made Sakura grin. She looked back at Kakashi, who seemed to be glowering from behind his book. She turned back to Sai who had a strange expression on his face.

He was scowling.

"You should stop having sexual intercourse with the non-Traitor." Sai said matter-of-factly, his eyes moving to Kakashi before back to Sakura. "If he was Traitorous enough to leave the village and kill his brother, I'm sure attempting to kill you and your lover is not far from reasonable in his mind."

"Hey! Sasuke's not-"

"A traitor?"

"He wouldn't just kill-" Naruto paused, lost for words. "Sasuke wouldn't do that-"

"Do you really think that?" Sakura whispered, quieting Naruto. "You don't know him like we do," she glanced at Kakashi, who flipped a page, "you see him without blinders on."

Sai's face was unreadable. "From past experiences, we know the traitor doesn't like being betrayed." Sai sat up straighter before looking over to Naruto, "A contradiction don't you think? And let's not forget he tried to kill you several-"

Naruto pounced on Sai, Sakura sighed, "I had forgotten about that…" Kakashi stood, moving towards her. As he joined their circle, Naruto stopped.

"I wouldn't worry too much, Sakura." Kakashi sat down next to her, leaning back on his hands, one landing on top of hers. "Sasuke's not stupid." Sakura stared at him. A vision of a bloodied and dying Kakashi welled up in her heart. "Sakura," she felt Kakashi's gloved hand give hers a small squeeze. His head dipped next to hers. "We have time. We'll just have to be stealthier. More 'ninja like.'"

Sakura squeezed his hand tightly.

“I know our time together is short, and I will have to say goodbye.

“But not yet.”

Sakura nodded, swallowing the large lump in her throat.

Pregnancies and Misconceptions

“Sakura,” Tsunade’s voice boomed from the hallway. Sakura bowed to the patient, slipping away and moving towards the door. “We need to talk.” Sakura nodded. She always dreaded their ‘heart-to-hearts.’ They usually led to talks about Kakashi.

She wasn’t sure how or when, but Tsunade knew about her and Kakashi. And after the ‘decision’ she *always* wanted to talk about it.

She knew that her Shishou meant well, but talking about it only reminded her of the time in front of her. When they had to break it off. She had fourteen months left before she would be forever Uchiha Sakura and the thought made her gut twist.

Things were getting better with Sasuke. He was tolerable, for the most part; she was able to relax during scheduled lunches and the more recurring surprise dinners. Sometimes she was able to smile or even laugh but it just made her wish she was with Kakashi.

The worst part was that she had a sickening feeling Sasuke knew what she was up to, but just not with who. Kakashi was an elite ninja; one of the best. And he knew how to evade someone he didn’t want to see. They had started meeting at her place, Kakashi almost living there unless he was on missions, escaping quickly in a puff of smoke before Sasuke rang the doorbell. Sasuke always stalked into her apartment, searching. As if he knew someone had just been there.

She hoped he still thought it was Sai.

Tsunade gestured to Sakura to follow her down a corridor to the private beds reserved for injured ANBU. “I want to talk to you about Naruto.”

She raised a brow, “Naruto? What’s wrong with Naruto?” She had just had ramen with him two days ago and he seemed healthy. Hell, she had never seen Naruto not healthy.

“It’s not Naruto…” she trailed off, walking at a brisk pace down to outpatient. “It’s Hinata. She came in because she was feeling sick and had back pains.” Her Shishou muttered something as she led her into room three.

Sakura’s eyes widened, “What’s wrong with Hinata.” Shishou snorted,

as Sakura saw, horrified, Hinata on the bed. “Hinata!”

“She’ll be fine, she just heard the news,” Tsunade sighed, “she’s pregnant.”

III

Sakura felt like her old genin self about to profess her love for Sasuke.

Except it was Naruto. The soon to be sixth Hokage, was reclining behind the Hokage desk, grinning like a maniac. He jumped as Tsunade waltzed in, his feet flailing as he fell, ankles over ass back in the chair.

“What’s up Sakura? It’s not every day you grace *my* office with your lovely smile.”

“It’s still my office you brat.” Tsunade growled, but her menacing smirk did not make Sakura’s news any easier. “Sakura has some news for you.”

She swallowed as both people in the room stared at her.

“You have a mission, Sakura.” Tsunade said as Hinata started coming to. “You need to tell Naruto.”

“Me!? Why do I have to tell him?!”

“Because the woman passed out just thinking *about telling him.”*

“Well, won’t he find out anyways?” Tsunade stared blankly, “Okay, so maybe ‘Hinata, you’ve gotten fat’ will be his first guess.”

“I need you to tell him because he needs to make preparations.”

“Preparations?”

Tsunade nodded, “Between the council and the Hyuuga clan, they’re going to want a marriage fast.”

Naruto tilted his head to the side, clamoring up the desk from the floor. “Sakura-chan? Are you ok?”

“-pregnant!”

Sakura froze, forgetting the first few words to the sentence. Tsunade sighed and Naruto’s eyes were wide. “You-you-you’re!”

“No!” she shouted louder than she meant, her whole body hot with embarrassment.“Hinata.” She clarified. “ *Hinata* is pregnant!”

Silence filled the Hokage’s office. And like Hinata, Naruto collapsed.

But Naruto recovered quickly, jumping up and over the desk. His face was serious as he grabbed Sakura by the shoulders, shaking her violently. He opened and closed his mouth before shaking his head and pulling her in a tight hug. “Oh! Sakura this is-this is amazing! *Me* !?” He laughed. “Me! A father.” He froze, pushing Sakura back. His face dropped “Father…Oh man. I don’t-I don’t think I can…Oh man.” He leaned back against his desk. “I-I don’t think I can do that.”

Sakura gripped his shoulder hard, “You’re about to run a village, Naruto, you can raise a kid.”

“Even if you’re still a child.” Tsunade said bitterly, but her eyes shone brightly.

“Pregnant!” he repeated, his face breaking into a wide grin, picking her up and whirling her around.

“Pregnant? Someone’s pregnant?” Sakura’s attention refocused on the voice in the hall. A familiar face peaked through the door. “Oh good, Sakura’s here.” Yamato smiled brightly, motioning someone in the hall. Sai walked in after him, a large, silver mass on his shoulders. Yamato sighed. “It’s not as bad as it looks; he’s just…well he’s Kakashi-sempai.” He motioned at the two. “He wouldn’t go to the hospital until we had given our mission report. His face brightened as he beamed at Sakura. “And Sakura-chan here! We can kill two birds with one stone! Now, who’s pregnant?”

“Sakura’s pregnant?” Kakashi said groggily.

Sakura scowled at Sai, “You can drop him anywhere.” Sai nodded, literally dropping Kakashi on the floor. Sakura gawked, “Sai! What the hell.”

“You said anywhere.”

“But not literally *drop* …”

She rushed to Kakashi’s side, hands already glowing green. She pressed her hand to his shoulder searching for the wound. “Slash across the shoulder?”

“Our target put up a massive fight. Luckily, or stupidly, Kakashi-senpai took the blow so we could stop the guy.”

“Probably both.”

“Sakura? You’re pregnant?” Kakashi sounded like death; she was hoping it was just from the infection growing on his arm.

“No, Hinata-chan is.” She glanced back up at Naruto, who puffed out his chest.

Naruto cleared his throat, going serious. “So I’m guessing the mission was a success?” Naruto asked, in his official voice.

As the rest of Team Kakashi went along with their report, Sakura inspected Kakashi; he was worn, beaten, but in one piece. Besides the tendons in his arm. “You’re going to have to go to the hospital.”

“No.” he croaked, swaying slightly.

“I’ll be there.” She tempted. He froze, before shaking his head, “No.” he sounded like a stubborn child.

“Well, that’s too bad.” She said before pressing the pressure point in his neck, making him collapse with a small thunk on the floor.

III

“So, how long is Kakashi going to be in the hospital?” Naruto said, hands in his pockets as he walked Sakura home.

“His injuries aren’t bad. Only a few days.”

“His injuries from the mission or the ones you gave him?” Naruto smirked.

“It could have been Sai that gave him the concussion.” She pressed her lips together, “That’s the main reason for the extra days.”

Naruto laughed as they walked up the stairs to her apartment. “I can’t believe I’m going to be a Dad…” he wore a sloppy grin on his face.

Sakura’s heart warmed and tingled slightly, “Who would have thought you would figure it out.”

“You are the one that told me all about that stuff! It’s your fault!” his voice went up an octave as he leaned against the wall adjacent to her

door. “My parents were young when I was born!” he said proudly.

She smiled, leaning against her door. “Oh really?”

His grin morphed into a sly smirk, “Weren’t married either.” He gave her a wink.

“Yeah, well that won’t go over well with Hinata-chan’s family.” She unlocked the door. “You better go looking for rings.” She opened the door, “Come on, I’ll make tea.” She walked into the kitchen, him trailing slowly. She had the tea kettle on the stove before he made it to the doorway.

“You think I can do all this?” he asked weakly. She turned, he was looking down at his feet. Her mind flashed back to the times she had seen him on the playground at the academy, swinging lonely in the tree swing. “Getting married…being a dad?”

She rolled her eyes, “You forgot the whole ‘running the village’ bit in your lament of your insecurities.”

“I’m serious.”

She closed the gap between them, pulling him into a tight hug. “You are going to be fine. You will do all this in true Uzumaki style.” She smiled at his slight confusion, “Running head first into the unknown.

He smiled, twirling her around, screaming loudly. “I’m going to be a Dad!”

Sakura laughed with him, returning the death grip he had on her.

“Is there something you’d like to share?” The icy cold voice made Naruto and Sakura freeze. They turned to see Sasuke standing in her living room, red eyes sharp, deadly. They looked from her to Naruto, back to her, making her unconsciously take a step away from Naruto.

Naruto put a protective arm around Sakura, but laughed carelessly. “I’m going to be a daddy, Sasuke! I’m going to have a little *baby* .”

Sasuke’s demeanor didn’t change. He stared at Sakura, “I’m hoping it’s not with my fiancé.”

“Of course not with her!” Naruto said, pulling Sakura slightly closer, making Sasuke’s eyes narrow more. “With Hinata-chan!”

There was a long silence. Then Sasuke’s eyes blinked back to their

dark onyx color. He glanced between Naruto and Sakura. “Well… congratulations.” He said politely.

Sakura pushed the feeling that was churning in her stomach away. “Yes, well there is a lot more work to do now.” She slipped out of Naruto’s grip. “You have to tell the head of the Hyuuga house, and I’m sure you’re going to have to get married before the baby comes, or even before she starts to show.”

Naruto’s eyes widened to the size of Ramen cups. “That’s soon!” Sakura nodded emphatically. Naruto paled. “I have to go see Hinata!” He gave Sakura a doleful look. She gave him a curt nod. Naruto’s lips quipped before he brushed past Sasuke.

Sakura and Sasuke stood there in silence until the tea kettle screamed. Sakura felt the tension build as Sasuke walked past her to turn off the burner. He leaned against the counter, the scowl still on his face. “So, Naruto’s gotten the Hyuuga girl pregnant.” He said coldly.

“I’m very excited for them.”

Sasuke’s brows furrowed as he looked at the floor. He grinned, shaking his head. “I was afraid it was you.”

She leaned against the doorframe to the kitchen and sighed, “No, it wasn’t me.”

“Because,” His voice was harsher. His knuckles were white against the counter. “Because if it was you, I don’t know what I’d do.” He took a harsh breath.

Guilt stabbed at Sakura as she took a few steps towards him, “Sasuke…” she reached out to touch his arm when a hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, twisting it violently as he shoved her against the cabinets, hand knocking into the hot kettle.

“I know you’re screwing around on me, Sakura.” He whispered harshly into her ear. Her hand burned, but if she moved her wrist would snap. “I am putting up with it for now, but I will *not* tolerate it once you’re mine.” Pain shot through her wrist as she felt it was on the breaking point.

Gritting her teeth she smashed her head against his nose. He released her.

She turned, “Fuck you,” she grabbed him by roughly by the collar. “I

will *never* be *yours* . Even after we're married." She felt chakra pulse under her fingers as she dragged him out of her house. "You try that shit on me again, I *will* kill you." She seethed, kicking him harshly with a chakra enhanced foot. As he doubled over in pain she slammed the door, sealing it with the strongest wards she knew.

She ran to the shower turning on the water as she stared at her wrist and her burned hand. She turned on the sink and ran cold water over her burn before starting the healing process. She was shaking as the cold water seared her skin.

"Damnit," she whispered as she looked to the door, knowing he couldn't get in. After her hand stopped burning under the cold water she stripped her clothes and got in the shower. She stared at her arm, which was still tender. She slowly healed it as warm water cascaded down her back.

After her skin returned to its natural pigment she leaned against the shower walls. *He was about to seriously hurt me.* Her mind flashed back to the night when Sai predicted something like this might happen. Her mind flashed to Kakashi, who was incapacitated in a hospital bed.

Kakashi!

Quickly she got out of the shower and dressed, and with wet hair, slipped through the window, jumping from roof to roof towards the hospital.

III

Kakashi woke to soft beeping. He opened his eye to see that he had been dragged to the hospital. He wiggled his toes and his fingers before assessing he was able to move before slowly lifting himself into a sitting position. He looked to his right, his eyes widened.

Sakura ?

She was in the chair next to the bed, sleeping, but she looked ragged. Much more ragged than he'd seen her in the Hokage's office. She was pale, making the dark circles under her eyes stick out. He struggled to shift, to get out of bed.

"Kakashi!" she flung herself out of bed and into his arm. Pain shot through his arm, but he ignored it. She was shaking and soon began sobbing. "I'm so sorry." She sobbed, "But we can't do this anymore." He swallowed thickly trying to pull her off him.

“Sakura, look at me.” She shook her head and held tighter.

“I can’t do it…” she said weakly.

“Shhh…” his good arm went to run through her lightly soaked hair, “It was just a dream.”

“No.” she choked, “I wish, but it wasn’t. He’ll kill us. We can’t-”

Kakashi pulled against her, finally able to pry her off him. “Sakura…” he said softly, “What happened?”

Her left hand came up to his face. Her chin trembled, but she didn’t speak. Her right hand trembled behind her. He sighed, pulling her onto the bed with him. She didn’t protest. She sobbed silently into his hospital gown, falling back asleep in his arms. He sat there, not moving.

What the hell happened ? His mind went back. He remembered the Hokage Tower…Sakura was there…and Naruto.

Naruto … his eyes widened. *Naruto was going to have a baby. Sasuke must have somehow thought it was with Sakura…it would be the only way…*

He slowly moved his hand down her arm, careful not to wake her as he picked up her right hand. He slowly turned it over and rage filled him.

Her hand was slightly off color, looking tender and pink.

It was burned.

Kakashi’s heart thudded in his chest as his fingers ghosted over the burn. Sakura winced, but didn’t wake.

Kakashi felt a force coming down the hall. The footsteps were authoritative and sounded angry.

His door swung open silently.

Tsunade and Kakashi stared at each other. She frowned, stepping into the room. She looked down at Sakura and then Kakashi. “What are you doing-”

“Right palm.” He whispered.

Tsunade looked cautiously at Kakashi before gingerly picking up her student's hand, turning it over.

Her eyes narrowed, laying the hand gently back down. “Who-”

“You already know.” He said darkly, “This is worth it?” his voice was low. “Is this all going to be worth it?”

“Naruto went back to check on Sakura and there was a massive seal on the door. He couldn’t break through it.” Kakashi didn’t speak. She frowned. “Why do you think he did this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? He heard about the pregnancy. He must have thought it was Naruto and Sakura.”

Tsunade stared, “That’s ridiculous.”

“Not for him.” He said cautiously. “He thought she was sleeping with Sai before.”

“He bruised her arm.” She said quietly. Kakashi’s eyes widened. “She-”

“Ino,” she said quietly. “She knew Sakura wouldn’t say anything and felt that I needed to know. ANBU is watching him closer.”

“Good job they did today.”

“Naruto was with her.” She snapped, “Uchiha was just admitted about an hour ago.” She smirked, “Broken nose and ribs. Said he fell.” He continued to scowl. “One of the reasons I let Sakura get picked was because I knew she could handle herself.” Before he could speak Tsunade whispered, “Or she can at least handle herself better than others.”

Kakashi took calm breaths as he looked down to Sakura. “She said we had to stop.”

Tsunade grunted. “You know that’s the right thing to do.”

Kakashi only stared at the woman in his arms.

Confessions

Naruto and Hinata's wedding was two months later. It was an outside wedding, despite it being the rainy season. It was small, held at the Hyuuga compound with a formal reception afterwards.

Kakashi sighed, standing next to Sasuke (who stood next to Naruto) and Yamato, waiting for the bride to come through the closed doors in front of them. They all wore black yukatas that were slightly itchy. It was drizzling. His gaze met Kurenai's who stood with the rest of her team off to the side. She gave him a wink before her attention was drawn to the door.

Kakashi stood tall.

Hinata was beautiful in her traditional wedding kimonos, its long sleeves being carried by Ino and Sakura, Hanabi carrying the tail. She walked regally, with purpose, her eyes focused on Naruto. She came to a stop in front of them and after a few adjustments, the women took a step back. Their kimonos were a much simpler light blue, their hair pulled back in simple updos. As the ceremony began, Kakashi's attention drifted to Sakura.

She's so beautiful … Her hair was pulled back from her face but still framed her cheeks and neck. He hadn't properly spoken to her after the episode in the hospital. When on missions together, she barely spoke to him, only when she had to act professional.

He could see it was all starting to wear on her. Though today it was hidden, she was paler. Dark circles rimmed her dulled eyes. Though he wasn't *always* at her side, his arms tightly around her, Sasuke kept a closer eye on her. Much closer than before.

Kakashi wanted to punch the bastard in the face.

As the ceremony went on, Kakashi's heart jumped as Sakura's eyes rose to meet his. He was transfixed; everything else melted away as they stood across the alise from each other, eyes locked. A smile spread over his lips.

A simple kimono would suit her best. It would be a winter wedding. We'd only have a few people; our team, her parents, Gai and Kurenai…She would be so beautiful.

Her eyes snapped down, looking at the ground in front of her, her eyes glossy. Kakashi's heart ached. He heard the small rustling next to him. He looked to his side, at Sasuke, who was watching Sakura. Anger bubbled in his chest. His lip curled and he balled his fist inside his sleeves. As the crowd around them cheered, Kakashi stood watching the one woman that had ever mattered to him bow her head in defeat.

And submission.

III

The reception was awkward to say the least.

The Hyuuga family stood at one end while the rest of the invited stood at the other end with Naruto and Hinata in the middle, completely oblivious to the tension.

He sighed. He should be happy for Sensei's son getting married. That he was able to see the day. Hopefully their marriage and baby are better off than Naruto was.

Kakashi went through the motions; eating, cake, and dancing. Hinata and Naruto danced without a care in the world and Kurenai pulled him out on the dance floor multiple times. Sasuke stood in the corner, brooding as Sai took Sakura out of the dance floor a few times, only leaving his spot in Naruto pushed him to take Sakura back from Sai.

Sasuke danced with her for two slow songs, both of them looking uncomfortable before he pulled her to a table in the corner. Kakashi stood against the wall, watching Sasuke and Sakura whispering. Sasuke had a frown on his face and his brows furrowed and Sakura looked slightly dejected. Sasuke went to grab her arm but before he could, Kakashi reacted.

Kakashi moved with lighting speed to Sakura's side. "Would you like to dance, Sakura?" he asked.

Sasuke's hand hesitated above Sakura's skin. Slowly, he retracted it. Kakashi gently helped Sakura to her feet, his eye never leaving Sasuke until Sakura was out of Sasuke's reach.

They walked in silence to the dance floor.

"Thank you." She whispered as she placed a hand on his shoulder and her fingers melted perfectly into his. They began swaying side to side.

“Is everything okay?” he spoke evenly, looking down at her.

She didn’t meet his eyes, “It’s alright. He just…wants to move in.”

“And you-”

“I am very persistent.” She sighed, “I like my space.” She turned, looking at Sasuke before moving closer, “I’m getting less hours at the hospital, no doubt from the Elders pressuring Tsunade. He is always around. The only time I get away from him is when I sleep.”

Kakashi just held her close.

She melted in his arms. “Tsunade’s going to stop sending me on missions soon.”

“She told me.” He let his thumb caress her hand subtly, “Soon it will be Tenzo, Sai and I.”

Sakura smiled, “Lucky.”

They danced in silence. “Sakura, I know that…that we’re done,”

“Kakashi-”

“But,” he brought the hand around her waist to her chin, lifting it to meet his eyes. “If you ever need me, for anything, I am here for you.”

The song ended and she smiled, wrapping her arms around him. “Thank you, Kakashi.”

He smiled, letting her go as Sasuke walked up. “It’s time to leave.”

She sighed heavily, her demeanor changing instantly. “Thank you for the dance.”

He waved, not trusting his voice.

III

“Are you sure you should be out drinking while your wife is at home pregnant?

“Sai, shut up.”

“I’ve read in a book that this type of behavior-”

“Sai, please, it’s okay.” Sakura smiled, internally screaming for Sai to stop talking. Sakura cheered as Sai shrugged, and went back to drink silently.

Sakura looked around the table. Naruto, ‘trying out’ his Hokage robes sat next to Sai and Sasuke, both who were sitting there staring into their drinks; Sai out of disinterest, and Sasuke to keep from glaring at Sai. On Sai’s left and almost straight across from her was Kakashi, who was taking small sips behind his orange book, and between her and Kakashi was Yamato, who seemed completely out of place and looking very uncomfortable.

This was another one of Naruto’s bold ideas, trying to keep the team in touch with each other, though they weren’t really a team at all. Sakura was all but banned from missions; Sasuke hadn’t been on a team with them since they were twelve, and Kakashi was back in the pool for another genin team with Sai, which meant they were sent out on duo or trio missions with Yamato.

It was strange to Sakura how Team Kakashi had gone from a teacher and students to what seemed to be a bunch of misfits.

“So, how is work at the hospital, Sakura-chan?” Yamato forced a smile, trying to ignore the icy look he received from Sasuke. Sakura sighed, ignoring Sasuke and went into a light conversation about the hospital. Sakura tried not to let Sasuke’s mood affect her.

Sakura took a long drink. “I’m not…really working in the hospital anymore.” She was lucky to get two shifts a week.

Sakura felt Sasuke’s hand move to lay awkwardly on her knee, gripping it tightly.

Yamato flushed, “Oh, right…sorry, Sakura-chan.”

She frowned slightly, a face no one at the table missed, making the grip on her knee tighten. Sakura took a deep breath, “Tell me about what you’re doing right now, Yamato-senpai.”

After a few hours and a few more rounds, Kakashi snapped his book close and bid them farewell, leaving Naruto snickering “Once he finishes a book and he has to talk to us, he’s gone!”

Time bled together. Sakura sat around her team, feeling detached as her mind wandered to Kakashi. It was the first time in years that the whole team, even if it included Sasuke, had gone out to get a drink,

but even before then, while reading his little orange book, he at least spoke to them. Even on occasion he paid for a few rounds. Something was off, and she wished she could ignore the small voice in her head that told her she knew why. She looked over to Sasuke, who looked bored listening to Sai and Naruto argue about social etiquette.

“Sakura-chan?”

Sakura looked up. “Kurenai-sensei, it is nice seeing you again. Is something wrong?” Kurenai had a strained smile on her lips. “Can I talk to you for a moment,” she paused, glancing to Sasuke. “Alone?”

Sasuke looked like he was about to decline, but Sakura nudged Sasuke, “Relax.” She whispered before jumping out of her seat. “Sure.” Kurenai nodded, quickly leaving the bar. “What’s going on?” Sakura said once they stepped into the cool air of the bar. “Is everything okay?”

Kurenai looked at Sakura before looking behind her, motioning with her head for Sakura to follow. Her eyes were glossy as she bit her lip, “A little.” She spoke softly, sounding melancholy. “It’s Kakashi, you’re the only one he listens to anymore, and it’s time for him to go home.”

Sakura tilted his head, “He came to your house?”

The older woman shook her head, not speaking as they headed towards the outskirts of the city. Sakura felt a weight settle in her stomach as she realized where they were going. She began walking faster. “From what Genma said, he’s been there for a few hours and he reeks of alcohol. I tried to talk to coax him, but he won’t acknowledge me. I think you might have a better shot.”

This wasn’t the first time she’s been asked to retrieve him from the stone. Usually she comes and stands at his side, not saying a word before he slowly comes out of himself, standing straighter. If they are alone, he grabs her hand and they take the long way back to the village, never speaking until they are back through the gates.

Kakashi has never told her why he comes. And she’s never asked. She always thought he would tell her in his own time. But she knows that none of the other jounin, not even Gai can pull Kakashi out of his reverie. Yamato has told her she has a special gift.

Sakura has always had a feeling she knew what it was.

“I’ll do what I can.” Sakura nodded, a little perturbed at the woman’s

sense of urgency. They moved through a small gated area of the memorial stone and Sakura's heart dropped.

Kakashi was in a crumpled heap at the base of the stone *sobbing* .

"It's an anniversary," Kurenai said knowingly. Sakura nodded as Kurenai turned and left.

They were alone, the only sound being Kakashi sobs.

I didn't realize he drank so much. Sakura mentally kicked herself; she was so wrapped up in *herself* she didn't pay attention to *Kakashi*. Sakura took a few tentative steps forward. She had seen him in many vulnerable positions over the years, but never this; making an un-Kakashi sounds, shoulders heaving, slurring incoherent words together. He was speaking to someone now, certainly not her.

He looked…so small.

"I've failed again, I'm so sorry, Obito." Sakura froze as Kakashi heaved, his shoulders shaking harder. She wanted to touch him, to wrap herself around those quaking shoulders and soothe him, but she was afraid. She had never dealt with a crying Kakashi before.

But he needs me . She took a small step forward and crouched next to him. Carefully she placed her hand on his back. He flinched under her touch, but didn't move away. She rubbed small circles on his back until his body stopped shaking, his breathing evening out. They sat like that until Kakashi slowly pulled himself up. Sakura didn't move her hand from his back as he sat down, knees in front of him. He put his head on his knees and took another breath.

"Obito…." Kakashi's voice was raw and high. Her eyes focused on the back of his head "He joined our team. He and Rin-they joined Minato-sensei and I once they graduated from the academy."

Sakura froze. Minato was the Fourth Hokage. Naruto's father. *Naruto's father was Kakashi's sensei?!*

"He was so stupid." Kakashi's bitter laughter brought her back, "He was lazy, constantly late, always making up stupid excuses about cats stuck in trees or little old ladies needing help to cross the street.

"It was my first mission as a Jounin. I was put in charge. And then Rin got captured and I wanted to go through with the mission. The mission always came first." He looked up at the stone. "But Obito

yelled at me. Said *Those that break the rules and regulations are scum. But those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum.* ”

Kakashi looked back down at his knees and Sakura wrapped her arms around him, pulling him in.

He let her. “He ran off, to save Rin, and *I just stood there* .” He paused, his body trembling as he leaned into her. He took a heavy breath. “If I would have followed him, if we wouldn’t have stopped and talked about it-argued about whether to *save Rin* -then maybe-

“When we found her, we were thrown into a fight. I lost my eye and by saving me, Obito was crushed by a falling boulder.” She gripped him tighter as he pulled into himself. His voice was almost inaudible. “He-he pushed me out of the way.” He took a deep breath shuddering, “He died because of me. He died *protecting* me. He gave me his life, his eye, and I didn’t deserve any of it.

“I promised him I’d protect Rin, but I couldn’t even do that.” She pressed her head into his shoulder, his arm came and gripped her shirt tightly.

“And now I can’t even protect you.

“What would Obito think of me *now* ? Even worse than *worse than scum* .”

“Kakashi, this isn’t your fault.”

“No one blamed me for their deaths either.” He laughed, pulling himself away, “Minato-sensei, even until his death, did not blame me for either of their deaths.”

“And he should have. And now I’m not some dumb kid.”

The look he gave her broke her heart. Sakura cursed herself, begging her mind to think of *something* , *anything* .

“I’m sorry, Sakura.” His hand cupped her face, “I should never-” He paused, physically swallowing.

She shook his head. “I’ve never had someone I’ve cared for last very long. My mother, father, Obito, Rin, Minato-sensei, and now you.”

Sakura felt something surge in her chest. It wasn’t anger, but it was close. “Me?” she gripped his hand. “What about me? I’m right here,

Kakashi." She kissed the top of his head, inhaling his scent. "I'll always be here for you.

"I'm not going anywhere."

He shook his head. "Sasuke," his fingers dug into her skin. "He's taken you away from me."

"I-I-will always be here for you." She stammered, cupping his neck and pulling him in so their foreheads touched. " *Always* , Kakashi." She blinked back tears as he pulled back, his sole eye spoke what her heart was screaming.

It's not the same .

"Why-why are you telling me all this Kakashi?" she whispered, too scared to move.

He closed his eye, his fingers dropping from her face, leaving her feeling cold, "I-I…" he shook his head, eye trailing the stone before nodding. He stood, "Come on."

She looked up at him, confused, "Ka-Kakashi?!"

He gave her one of his eye crease smiles, ruffling her hair. His fingers sifted through the locks before his hand came in front her, his palm open. "Let's go home."

Guilt pooled in her gut. She thought of Sasuke. Of what he might do to Kakashi, "You know I can't-"

"Walk me home then." His voice was small and weaker than she'd ever heard it. He wiggled his fingers.

Sakura reached and grasped his hand. "Come on, let's get you home." He nodded, squeezing her hand as he led her towards the gate.

And as they crossed the threshold, he let go.

III

Sakura slipped into her apartment quietly, closing the door behind her before padding towards the bedroom. She peeled off her clothes, heading towards the shower as she thought about what had perspired in the last few hours.

While she walked him home and made him tea, he became a waterfall

of information; he spoke of his father, of how his other teammate, Rin died by his hands. The heavy burden of his sins he'd been carrying all these years finally seemed to lift. Never had Kakashi been so open with her. Her mind reeled.

And as he said good night, he interlaced their fingers as they made their way to the door. He squeezed her hand, slipping it out of hers as he opened the door.

She looked down at her hand as she turned on her shower. It still seemed to burn from his touch.

He spoke of his biggest regrets; one above Obito and Rin and even Minato. One that would forever eat at him. That he never told 'them' that he loved them. That he could have been brave enough to sweep them away and to never look back.

I should have asked who that was. Sakura sighed, looking at the falling water from her shower. *But I was too afraid.* Afraid to know who that was. Afraid she already knew.

Afraid that it was already too late.

Envious

“That lock on the door is there for a reason.” Sakura made a mental note to learn stronger seals to put on her door. Since the whole lock thing wasn’t working out.

She put her hands on her hips as she glared at Sasuke, who was sitting on her couch, looking indifferently at her. His arms were folded over his dark blue long sleeve shirt.

“They aren’t there to just keep out burglars.” She huffed impatiently.

He snorted. She took a deep breath, trying to keep her anger in check. She felt a phantom burn on her right hand despite it being completely healed. She took a deep breath. “What do you want, Sasuke?”

“Where are you going?” His voice was even, with a small tinge of a threat.

She stared. “Work.” She couldn’t keep the anger out of her voice. “I do that sometimes. When I’m lucky. And if I don’t leave now, I’m going to be late.” Sasuke wasn’t impressed. She pinched her nose. “Why are you here?”

“Is that really where you’re going? *Work* ?”

She put her hands on her hips, trying to push her anger down, “Of course that’s where I’m going. Where else would I be going?”

He turned away from her, “Go to work.” He frowned.

“Fine.” She huffed, watching him. When he didn’t move she swung her arms. “Well? Get up! You’re not staying here!”

He stared.

Her hand clenched, but she thought better of it. “Whatever.” She stalked to the door, stomping into her shoes, slamming the door behind her, threatening the hinges to break.

III

“So you just left him there?” Ino asked incredulously. Sakura trailed Ino as she started making her rounds at the hospital.

“What else was I going to do?! I was going to be late!” She exasperated, slamming a file on the table, turning to Ino. “He follows me everywhere! I can’t even keep him out of my damn apartment!”

Ino put a finger to her chin, “I’d get a broom. Threaten him with it.”

Sakura’s hand heated up, “I doubt that’s the best idea.”

“Does he still think you’re cheating on him?”

Sakura shrugged. “Probably.”

“Last time it was with Naruto. I remember that.” Ino said, turning around slightly, before walking into a room. “Is he back on Sai?”

Sakura shuddered, leaning against the door. She looked up at the flickering lights. Wasn’t her stopping everything with Kakashi supposed to make life with Sasuke easier?

She didn’t go on missions anymore, her time at the hospital was almost nonexistent. She rarely spent time with anyone other than him.

What more did he want?

Ino emerged from the room and gave Sakura a sympathetic look. “Well, I would say if the whole broom thing doesn’t work, then just move. Live with me or Sai or Kakashi-sensei or something. That way he can’t find you. Well, he *can* but it will be more difficult to get to you…”

Sakura’s mind flashed to Kakashi’s apartment, what had become her home away from home, but she didn’t speak.

“Or…” Ino glanced over to Sakura slyly.

Sakura groaned, “Ino,” she warned.

The blond only shrugged, turning back towards Sakura’s office. “Well, you should be happy in one aspect of your life besides work. And if he thinks you’re cheating on him, then do it.”

“You’re the one who told me to cut it off-”

“I changed my mind.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And if I went through with your stupid plan, and got caught, would you be the one to come claim my dead body as

well as my…lover's?" the word 'lover's' rolled off her tongue awkwardly, making Ino grin.

"I'm just saying you act like he owns you or something." Ino rolled her eyes at Sakura's glare. "You need to be free, Sakura." Ino's voice was softer as she came and hugged her friend. "Go get laid by some good looking guy that can keep his mouth shut."

Sakura sighed, following Ino as she marched to the nurses' station. Ino looked back at her friend, "And look, the perfect man." Ino gestured down the hallway. "You can make it a self fulfilling prophecy."

Sakura laughed, seeing Sai wave awkwardly at them. "I was going to pick Rock Lee to be honest."

"He wouldn't keep his mouth shut, you know that." Ino's face straightened, "Or maybe you should." She nudged Sakura, "I'll see you later. Think about what I said!"

"Thanks." Sakura muttered as Sai approached.

"Hello, Sakura." Sai said curtly with his fake smile plastered on his face. "I have been told to escort you to Ichiraku's, in place of the dickless Hokage."

Sakura frowned, "He's not Hokage yet."

Sai's grin grew wider, "You are correct, but he seems to think otherwise."

Sakura shook her head and smiled. Sai's smile morphed slightly, looking more natural. He pulled a scroll out of his pouch. "It is an A ranked mission given to me by the dickless Hokage. Very serious business.

"Take Ugly out to lunch."

Sakura rolled her eyes, "It doesn't say that,"

Sai nodded, "It might say 'Sakura-chan,' but his handwriting is abysmal."

She giggled. "Alright. Let's go." They were silent for the trip, when they sat down at the bar and while they ordered food.

"May I ask you a personal question, Sakura?" Sai said sullenly.

Sakura looked over to Sai, her heart leaping in anticipation. “Yes, Sai. What is it?”

“Are you in a sexual relationship with Kakashi-senpai?”

Sakura stared blankly at Sai, heart dropping. “No, Sai.” She said, turning back to her food, staring at it disdainfully. “No Sai, I’m not.”

“Are you sure?” Sai’s voice was quiet. “Because I think you are, and, as friends, we’re supposed to be able to be open with one another.”

She looked coldly at him. Sai looked at her blankly. They sat like that for a few moments before Sai spoke again. “I shall go first. Sakura, I know that you have been having a sexual relationship with Kakashi-senpai. It has been going on for years, but over the last few months it has diminished.” Sakura’s mouth was agape, staring at her teammate, who smiled. “Okay, now it's your turn. ‘Confide’.”

Sakura looked back down at her now cold noodles. “Why are you asking me this now Sai?” she asked, defeated.

“I am curious as to why you ceased your relationship. Your smiles do not reach your eyes anymore; I simply assumed there was a correlation.” He leaned in close, “I understand you are betrothed to the Traitor but I have read in many books that women (and some men) continue relationships outside the main one to fulfill sexual and emotional needs.” Sai gave her a serious look, “And I’m *sure* that the Traitor isn’t going to fulfill either of those.”

Sakura looked at Sai for a moment before she exploded in laughter. Sai smiled as she clutched him, fearing falling off the stool as she laughed, her mouth hurting from her smile, her eyes watering as she gulped for air. She slowly calmed herself, looking up to her teammate who was *really* smiling at her before she burst into another fit of giggles before she clutched her side. “I’m sorry Sai. I don’t know why that was so funny.” She wiped her eyes.

“I tried ‘dry humor with a side of sarcasm,’ I assume that I did well?” she giggled again.

“Yes, thank you, I needed that.” She straightened herself on the bar, taking a few heavy breathes before she resumed eating.

“Despite my wit, it was a serious question.” Sai nudged her. “Why stop?”

“Because it’s not right, Sai.” She said slightly deflated. “I have to be faithful. Because if I wasn’t and Sasuke found out…” images of her blood and Kakashi’s mangled body flashed through her head. “He wouldn’t be too pleased.” She finished weakly.

Sai shrugged, taking a bite out of his food. “But if you love someone, you should be with them, correct?”

Sakura sputtered, “Love? I don’t-”

“Even I can see it Sakura.” He said matter of factly. “Or…” he mused, “Perhaps it’s because it’s me that only I can see.” He thought about it for a moment before shrugging. “Either way, I’m envious of you both.”

“Envious?”

“I doubt I’ll ever be capable of feeling ‘love.’” He said casually. “It’s not something you can pick up in a book. But, perhaps I’ll be in love and not know it, but I doubt I won’t be that stupid.” She thought he might be making another ‘dry humor with a side of sarcasm’ bit but she wasn’t sure.

“Kakashi needs to stop lending you his Icha Icha.” She sighed. Sai looked at her blankly, making her smile.

“You are a true friend, Sakura.” Sai spoke, “And I want to see you be happy again.” He said blankly.

She put a hand on Sai’s arm, “Thanks-”

The sound of stools skidding and colliding with the floor filled the small stand as Sai grabbed her arm. She was roughly pushed against the bar, as he pulled out a kunai. Blood was pounding in Sakura’s head as she felt Sai’s hand tighten on hers as Sai’s voice was low and growled.

“Leave her be.” Sakura felt ice course through her veins as Sai’s voice was filled with ice.

“She’s *mine* . Give her to me.” It was Sasuke, voice sounding authoritative and dark.

“She’s not any one’s. Sakura is Sakura’s.” Sai’s voice was slowly gaining warmth, leveling at his usual monotone. His shoulders were back; his left hand with the kunai was poised in front of his chest, in front of both of them.

They're going to kill each other. "It's alright Sai." Sakura said softly. His grip slackened on her wrist as his head whipped towards her. She smiled as strongly as she could. "I'll be fine." She slowly edged her way from behind Sai, back straight as she watched Sasuke. His eyes glared red as he looked at her.

"You're supposed to be at work." He said roughly.

"I was. Now I'm at lunch."

"You didn't say you were taking-"

"I have to eat, Sasuke." She said curtly. Sasuke frowned deeply.

"Let's go." He went to grab her but she knocked his hand away and stalked away. She felt him follow her. The closer she got to her apartment, the more her heart pounded, the drier her mouth got and the deeper her heart dropped into her stomach.

She wasn't surprised when Sasuke followed her into her apartment, closing the door behind him with a small click.

The Fight

Sakura almost broke her door down entering her apartment. She walked with purpose to her bookshelf, ignoring Sasuke.

“Are you going to explain yourself?” Her hand moved under one of the shelves, freezing as she felt nothing.

The hidden kunai was gone.

She turned to face Sasuke.

He tilted his head, his face blank. “You don’t have any reason to have kunai anymore.” He took a step towards her.

She took a step back, back bumping the bookshelf.

Chakra pulsed through her as Sasuke materialized in front of her. She watched, as in slow motion, as his fist cocked back. Quicker than she thought possible, she moved, punching him in the solar plexus. He skidded back, pausing slightly to cough, specs of blood landing on his hand. He scowled.

“So this is how it is. I’ve been patient with you. I let you live your life- let you go on missions, working in the stupid hospital and even *fuck* whoever you want, and this is how you thank me?”

“You haven’t let me do anything! I’ve done what I’ve wanted.” She dropped down in a fighting stance, her hands shaking slightly.

He laughed, shaking his head before charging. “Is that so?” Sakura could only block as Sasuke's punch was aimed at her head. She tried to counter. He took advantage of an opening. He kneed her in the stomach.

Air *whoosed* from her. She gritted her teeth. She grabbed his raised leg. Spinning them both, she took a step back and tossed him into the bookcase. She ran towards the kitchen, listening for him. She threw herself at a toaster oven and smashed her hand through the small window, grabbing a hidden kunai spinning sharply, slicing the air in front of Sasuke. He grabbed her neck and squeezed tightly, making her cough. “You fucking bitch.” He seethed. His eyes were spinning. His Mangekyō activated. “I will show you why you don’t betray me.

Before Sakura could blink she was thrown into a black space. She spun

around, eyes trying to see anything. She let out a small yell.

“Sakura!” she froze, smiling wide.

“Naruto!”

There he was. Running towards her, his Hokage robes billowed as he ran towards her. She took a few steps towards him, “Sasuke’s lost his…” she stopped, “Naruto?” his eyes were red, red chakra slowly oozing out of him as he dropped to all fours snarling at her. She took a step back as he got closer. One tail whipped behind him. Then two. Three. Four. When he reached her, his left hand high over his head, razor sharp claws aimed at her, he had six tails.

Pain ripped through her as his chakra claws ripped her chest, his sharp teeth tearing into her neck. She couldn’t scream.

This isn’t real, this isn’t real, this isn’t real. This. Is. Not. Naruto! She forced chakra into her foot and kicked hard, making him rise in the air, his claws and teeth pulling her skin with him.

“Sakura!” Yamato was in front of her, his wood prison jumping out of the blackness around Naruto. Naruto lay there, breathing deeply in his cage for a moment before slowly shaking his head. “Sakura? Sakura! Oh my god what happened to you!” tears welled in her eyes as Naruto rattled the bars of his cage. “I’m so sorry Sakura! Please! Let me out!”

Yamato laughed, “Not a chance, Kyuubi!” Yamato turned to Sakura, bending down, gently touching her arm. “Are you okay, Sakura-chan?” he said softly.

She looked down, the blood, tears and pain suddenly gone. She nodded slowly. He grinned evilly. “Good.” He slowly shucked off his flak jacket. She tried to crawl backwards but there was a wall behind her.

Suddenly it was bright. The sun was shiny and they were out on training ground three. She looked down to Yamato who was unbuckling his pants. “Ya-yamato-senpai?” her voice was shaking.

“I saved your life Sakura.” He chided, “It’s the least you can do.” Before she could move wood trapped her feet and hands. She struggled against them, pulsing chakra into her wrist but he laughed. “You won’t be able to break free.” His hand trailed up her side, making her let out a low whine as he pulled a kunai out from behind him, slowly pulling it up her side, slicing her clothes easily.

His dark eyes were hungry. “It will be like all the other times.” He whispered, kissing her. She felt her body go numb. “It won’t hurt. Much.”

His hands grabbed her legs. Tears rolled down her cheek. “Yamato-senpai…” she sobbed.

“Well this isn’t fair is it?” she heard Kakashi’s voice.

She sobbed. *Not you, please not you.*

She pulled on her restraints. She felt a cloth going across her eyes. “You shouldn’t get her all to yourself.”

“We can share.” Yamato said roughly. She felt her legs spreading on their own accord, the binds pulling roughly on her ankles.

“Who goes first?” Kakashi’s voice slurred slightly.

“How about at the same time?” Sakura withered and fought her binds.

Goosebumps rose on her skin as she felt cold. Two pairs of hands were on her, pulling at tattered clothes and arms, legs and breasts.

A fingerless gloved hand pulled at her face, “This will hurt, Sakura-chan, ne?” Kakashi’s voice said brightly.

Commotion and screams rang in her ears. Her hands were free and she ripped the cloth off her eyes.

Kakashi and Yamato lay bleeding, dying around her. Sasuke stood tall, a clash of lighting filling the now dark training grounds.

“You’re safe.” He said calmly.

She shook her head as she watched him kneel down. “They all betrayed you.” He said softly. “How can you let them live?” He handed her a kunai. “Kill them.”

She felt her body move as she slowly crawled to Yamato’s side. She held up her hand and she felt the Kunai land coldly and heavily in her hand. She mechanically brought the knife to Yamato’s throat. His eyes came into focus and he screamed, “I’m sorry, god Sakura, please! I’m so sorry!” She slit his throat. His blood coating her face. She blinked.

She crawled to Kakashi, who was looking at her with fear. His face was rounder than she remembered. His scar deeper down his face, his

lips thinner. “Sakura, please.” He whispered.

“You did this to me.” She said automatically. She wanted to shake her head and scream. *Kakashi! Please! I can’t-*

He smiled, “it's okay.” He lifted his chin, giving her more skin. “It’s alright.”

Her hands shakily rested the blade on Kakashi’s skin. She wanted to close her eyes but they stared, unblinking into Kakashi’s. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Kakashi-”

“ *Sakura* !”

Everything went black.

III

The sound of metal clashing startled her away. Her head pounded and her body hurt. “Sakura!” a voice screamed, “Go Sakura!”

It was Sai.

He was fighting Sasuke, giant tigers filling her small kitchen. A giant bird appeared and landed next to her. It shook nudged her slightly and Sakura numbly grabbed onto its inky feathers. It zoomed.

Sakura was outside her apartment, high in the sky as the bird grew, sitting somewhat comfortably on its back. The images flashed in her eyes and she crumbled against the bird and sobbed.

III

She landed at another apartment building. The bird slowly slid her off its back before walking up to a door, knocking on it with its beak. Sakura watched the bird fall away into a puddle of ink as light came from the door.

“Sakura! Sakura!” Mismatched eyes filled her vision. She felt something warm wrap around her and she inhaled a wonderful scent.

The scent of love. Of home.

Of him .

Exhaustion washed over her as her vision faded, but that was ok. She was in Kakashi's arms. She was safe.

She was home.

Recovery

Sakura woke surrounded by the smell of home.

Kakashi .

She felt her body relax into the soft sheets. Everything hurt, nothing more than her head; it pulsed painfully with her heartbeat. She tried to open her eyes, but they were too heavy. It was too much.

But she inhaled again. *Kakashi* enveloped her. Everything hurt but she was safe.

Safe with Kakashi.

She allowed everything to fade away again.

III

“Why didn’t you stop it sooner?” an angry male voice snapped.

It seemed wrong, this tone. He never spoke like this. He never-

“I got there as soon as I could.” Another male voice said. It took was wrong. Too full of emotion. “I couldn’t very well trail after them. He would have-”

“He wouldn’t have done this-”

“If you had been in my position you would have done the same thing, Captain.” The second voice said in a monotone voice.

There was silence.

“I know.” The voice sounded sad but Sakura fell into oblivion.

III

Sakura woke again to the sound of something crashing.

She was still cocooned in the scent of safety. Everything hurt, but not as bad. Sakura exhaled in relief. She wiggled her toes.

“We can’t have this happen again! I forbid it!”

“Well what are we supposed to do!?” The second voice was lower but

filled with the same emotion as the first.

“We can’t tell Naruto.” Sakura focused on the voice.

Shishou.

“If we tell Naruto about this, then we would have to tell him *everything* . And he won’t like everything.”

“And you think not telling Naruto is for the best? He’s been over here three times asking where Sakura is,”

Kakashi.

“He needs to know what is going on. What Sakura is doing.”

“And then what?!” Tsunade snapped. She laughed, “You think he’s just going to try to pull the breaks on this? On him not becoming Hokage? On Sakura having to-to-” they were silent. Sakura’s eyes fluttered as she barely heard Tsunade’s voice, “She won’t stop this, will she?”

Sakura wasn’t sure if she fell asleep or if they had stopped talking.

“What if…” Kakashi’s voice drifted back into focus. A deeper voice spoke and Kakashi mumbled something back. “The village knows Naruto is going to be Hokage,” he mused, “the elders can’t really go back on that.”

“What are you getting at Hatake?” Tsunade said impatiently.

“What if…Sakura disappears?”

There was a pregnant pause. “Hatake,” Tsunade warned.

“It would be better than Sasuke killing her.” Kakashi said seriously. “She just…disappears.”

There was another pause. “I’ll think about it.” There was shuffling and the sound of the door opening. “I’ll be here first thing tomorrow,” Tsunade threatened, “I have to take care of the Uchiha.”

The door slammed. Feeling overwhelmed, Sakura let unconsciousness overtake her.

III

Sakura woke to something warm in her hand. She squeezed it when she realized what it was.

Who it was.

“Is he still being quarantined?”

“Blind folded with a chakra seal,” Sai’s voice forced Sakura to open her eyes. “He’ll stay there until the Council knows what to do with him. Though, if it were up to Tsunade-sama he wouldn’t see the light of day.” Sai sounded like he agreed.

Kakashi’s thumb rubbed against the top of her hand. “Do you know what happened?” His hand squeezed hers again.

“When I arrived he had her deep within the realm of the Mangekyō in her kitchen.” Sai said after a pause. Kakashi froze. “I reported as much to Tsunade-sama and the Council. Tsunade-sama ‘asked’ him what that meant, and he didn’t say anything. And I don’t suspect he will.

“Until she tells us, or they get a Yamanaka over here, we won’t know.”

Kakashi’s hand slipped from hers and she felt cold. She winced.

She heard Kakashi pad out of the room, Sai at his heels.

III

“How are you holding up, Kakashi?” Tenzo held up a bouquet of flowers, grimacing. Kakashi let him in the apartment. Tenzo hummed, kicking out of his shoes. “I know this has to be hard for you,

“You never took things happening to teammates well.” Tenzo gave him a knowing look. Kakashi ignored how that turned into *another* look. A look he didn’t want to deal with right now.

He jerked his head towards the hall. Kakashi put his hands in his pockets, “I’m sure she’ll like the flowers.”

Tenzo laughed, “Your apartment has always been drab.”

“Practical,” Kakashi chided.

Before they made it to the room, Tenzo’s hand gripped his arm. “She’s alright?”

Kakashi ignored the pang in his chest. Or the tightness in his throat.

He gave a curt nod. “Better everyday.” He sighed, “Just don’t expect her to talk. Or look you in the eye.”

“Has-has she told you what happened?”

He shook his head, “she hasn’t spoken a word. Not even to me.” Kakashi the commander was at a lost but Kakashi the-

But *her* Kakashi was even more at a loss. “Tsunade said we had to give her time. That she’d come around.” He shook his head, “Sakura!” He said as cheery as he could muster, “Guest!”

Kakashi opened the door. Sakura sat in the bed, the blankets pooled in her lap and his ninken snoozing around her. She glanced up and her eyes landed on Tenzo behind him.

“Sakura! How are-”

Kakashi’s eyes widened as Sakura let out a scream. She scrambled, kicking and pressing herself against the headboard, fear clear in her eyes.

The dogs jumped to their feet, suddenly alert, growling, looking around. Kakashi held up his hand, his heart hammering at the look in Sakura’s eyes. “Sakura?”

Tenzo stumbled back into the hall, the flowers falling to the floor.

Sakura took a shaking breath before she swallowed. Her face went from pale to red as she grabbed the blanket and pulled it up over her chest. “I’m-I’m s-sorry.” Her voice wasn’t the only thing that trembled. She looked away, her knuckles white against the navy fabric.

Kakashi held up his hands, looking back at Tenzo. He looked almost as afraid as Sakura. “I’ll be right back, Sakura.”

She nodded, biting her lip as her chin trembled violently.

Kakashi stepped out of the room, careful to not step of the flowers. Kakashi turned to Tenzo, who looked at his commander for answers he didn’t have.

They both stood straighter as a piercing sob erupted from the other side of the door. They stood their staring fearfully at each other as Bisuke whined as Pakkun could be heard whispering to the woman. Kakashi turned to stare at the door, lost.

And then Kakashi heard her frantically whisper, “it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real, it wasn’t *real* .”

What happened to you, Sakura?

He heard Tenzo move, coming next to him and bending down to pick up the flowers. Kakashi watched as he took a step back and held them out to him.

Kakashi’s chest twisted painfully at the look on his face, “Take care of her Kakashi-sempai.”

Kakashi took the flowers from him and nodded slowly. Tenzo turned and quickly left, leaving Kakashi alone.

Kakashi stood at the door, staring at the dark wood as his mind was completely and utterly blank as he listened to her cry.

He waited until her sobs became sniffles and then deep, heavy breathes. He carefully opened the door and he peaked in.

His ninkin were closer now. Sakura’s face was buried in Bull’s neck, sobbing. He sat tall, nuzzling her the best he could. Pakkun sat up alert when he saw Kakashi. He hopped on Bull’s head and whispered something to Sakura. She tensed slightly before nodding. Pakkun hopped off Bull and slowly the other seven dogs followed the small pug out of the room.

There was a heavy silence. Sakura, sitting with her arms in her lap, her head bent, hair obscuring her face.

Kakashi took a few steps towards the bed, the flowers limp at his side.

Slowly, inch by inch, he sat down, giving her a wide berth.

He hadn’t expected her to speak, but when she did, he was like a punch to the gut. “Naruto…would never hurt me, would he?”

Kakashi felt like he was going to be sick. “Never.” He said evenly.

“And Yamato-sempai?” her voice quivered with more intensity.

“Absolutely not.” He said with authority.

Her head evened out, her face looking older than it should. Her eyes more dead than they should ever be. “And you?” She asked with sincerity.

Kakashi couldn't breathe.

Sakura looked away.

He gripped the flowers tightly, resisting every urge to reach out to touch her. To hold her. To wipe her tears away.

"No." He said with the most conviction he could muster.

She nodded slowly, taking it in.

"Sakura." His voice was low. Commanding. Calm but firm. "What did he do? What did you see?"

Sakura shook her head, her shoulders trembling. Her red, swollen eyes filled with tears as she bit her chapped lips. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry! I'm not-" She sobbed. "I'm not strong-"

He barely registered flowers falling from his hand as he turned. His arms were open and she tumbled into him. She let out another sob, gripping his shirt with white knuckles as she begged his forgiveness. And like the first night, he rocked her, whispering nothings into her ear.

"It's alright. I'm here. Everything is going to be fine." It wasn't alright. *She* wasn't alright. But he was here. And he would protect her.

Things that are not planned need planning

Ino sat with her face in her hands. Her shoulders quivered as Tsunade rubbed her back with vigor. Kakashi stood in the Hokage's office, slouched, hands in his pockets looking indifferent.

He felt anything but.

Sakura had been at his house for two weeks and still hadn't spoken. She sat, curled on his couch most days, sitting with her arms hugging her knees, her eyes unfocused.

And she wouldn't let him touch her. Wouldn't let *anyone* touch her, going into hysterics if anyone got too close.

Tsunade tried everything to get Sakura to talk, to say *something* , but eventually she had to call Ino to search her mind. So Sakura wouldn't have to tell her story.

Kakashi watched as Ino entered Sakura's mind. The technique takes moments; in a blink, Ino was already done, her eyes filled with tears as she whispered something to Sakura before gently touching her arm.

Like a cord snapping, Sakura latched on to her friend, crying into her shoulders.

Hours laters when Ino relayed what she learned to him and the Hokage in the Hokage office, Ino cried softly as she relayed what she learned.

That Sasuke put her under a heinous genjutsu.

Kakashi felt like he was going to be sick. "It still doesn't explain the black eye." He spoke softly.

"He-he must have done it when she was under the gen-genjutsu." Ino hiccupped.

Kakashi nodded, hands clenched in his pockets.

"Does Naruto know?"

Tsnuade didn't meet his gaze. "He's unaware that Sakura is staying with you."

“ *How* .” Ino demanded. “Sasuke’s been in solitary confinement for two weeks.”

“Between Hinata, the Hyuuga’s, Shizune has been training him on paperwork. I didn’t want to say anything until we knew exactly what happened.” Tsuande frowned, “I’ll have to speak to the Elders.” Tsunade exhaled, “I can only imagine what he’s told them during his confinement.”

Kakashi stood straight. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to call this damn thing off!” Ino whirled to Tsunade. Her fist clenched as a fire set in her eyes. Kakashi’s chest warmed; Sakura would have been thrilled to see Ino’s reaction.

“We *can’t* .” Tsunade insisted.

“Why!?” Ino hissed, turning to look at Tsunade, eyes pleading.

“Sakura wouldn’t stand for it.” Kakashi said numbly. Ino turned swiftly to look at him. “She knows what’s at stake and she would sacrifice everything for Naruto to have his dream.

“And-” Kakashi swallowed thickly, “She wouldn’t allow anyone to take her spot. Especially after this.”

“Wh-”

“Naruto has given up more for this village than anyone else.” Tsunade agreed. “This is what he deserves. And even if he didn’t, it’s what Sakura thinks he deserves and she won’t back down. You know that.” Tsunade looked at Kakashi. “Which is why I want to hear this plan of yours again.”

“It wasn’t a plan.” Kakashi mused, “A suggestion at best, but not-”

“What plan?”

“We instate Naruto as Hokage early. Use this as leverage to push that before-” he made a gesture, “before Sakura has to marry Sasuke.” Kakashi stood straight. “And then…” *And then the most preposterous thing I would ever dream of saying-*

“And then Sakura defects from the village.” Tsunade finished. Ino gasped. Tsunade nodded, “Then, he will instate her back after we have figured out what to do with Sasuke.”

Kakashi's hands clenched. *Killing him* .

Ino read his mind. "Why not just kill him now!?"

"The Elders-"

"The Elders have not *seen* what he did to her!" Ino shouted, standing up. " *I have.* "

"And neither did the rest of the village! The other clans!" Tsunade stood her full height, making Ino back down, slightly. "They think that Sasuke has done nothing wrong. That he is a man of changed ways. What will they think if we kill him?" Her eyes flashed to Kakashi, "Or let someone else kill him?

"The clans, yours included, know what happened to the Uchiha clan. They stepped out of line and the village took care of them.

"And now you're suggesting they do it again."

"What he did to Sakura-"

"Is clan business." Kakashi said. Ino looked like he slapped her. "You should know better than anyone that the clans are held to different standards. If Sasuke calls 'clan business' and then is killed?"

"The Hyuugas, even the Yamanaka's, wouldn't stand for it. They will call foul and could retaliate."

"It could cause a civil war." Kakashi summarized. "If not a fourth shinobi war."

Ino looked down at her feet. "Well, I *wish* I could kill him."

Kakashi mentally agreed.

III

"Now, Sakura." Kakashi watched as Koharu inspected Sakura with mild distaste. Kakashi's fingers itched to grab Sakura's hand, to touch her in any way, but he kept them pressed against his sides. Sakura lifted her chin high. "It seems that you had…a disagreement with Sasuke-kun." Sakura tensed, but only nodded. Kakashi tore his eyes away from Sakura, meeting Tsunade's at the table with the two elders, Naruto behind her, looking slightly confused.

Sasuke stood next to Naruto, looking bored.

It was almost like a trial.

“I understand that Sasuke-kun made a few mistakes in judgment, but we cannot simply go running to ‘sensei’ every time you have a little martial scuffle.”

Tsunade’s eyes made him keep his mouth shut.

But not Naruto. “Martial scuffle?” Naruto turned to Sasuke, “What are they talking about? You’re not married.”

Sakura set her jaw. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

“We know what to call it.” Koharu rolled her eyes, “Now, it seems that Sasuke-kun has pleaded with you to join living arrangements?” Koharu ignored the Hokage-to-be. Kakashi’s heart dropped as Sakura trembled. “I think that it is a fair idea. After all, you will be married in less than a year.”

“But-”

“We expect Sasuke to be fully moved into your apartment in no less than six months.” Homaru spoke swiftly, standing. “ *We* ,” he looked at Tsunade, “understand the last few weeks have been strenuous, so we will be asking Sasuke to give you your space for another month. But after that, things return to normal.” He briskly walked towards the door, “Or perhaps normal isn’t the right word. After all, Sasuke-kun has allowed,” Homaru curled his lip, “Certain *indiscretions* that are truly appalling for the next Lady of the Uchiha clan.

“The clans of this village have reputations to uphold, as I’m sure Sasuke has brought to light. Think about over the next month, Haruno.” And with that, he left the room, Koharu in his wake.

The room grew silent after their departure. Before Naruto could ask any questions, Sasuke nodded, “I’ll see you in a month, Sakura.” He briskly walked to the door, “Training later Naruto?”

Naruto eyed the Uchiha carefully before nodding. “An hour before dusk.”

Sasuke left and Kakashi watched Sakura's pale face. She had her lower lip between her front teeth, her shoulders trembling. He itched to pull her into his arms.

Naruto studied her with a serious look on his face.

“Come on,.” Kakashi said, grabbing Sakura’s upper arm gently. She flinched, but immediately pressed her arm into his. Her eyes met his and his heart twisted at the look she gave him. “Let’s go home.”

She blinked before she relaxed into his hold. “Let’s go home.”

“Home? What?”

But Kakashi didn’t care about that as he pulled Sakura into him. Her arms wrapped around him as he made the hand signs behind her back.

He wrapped his arms around her as they disappeared in a puff of smoke.

III

Kakashi felt his feet touch the ground as his senses were enveloped in the smell of his apartment.

And then he felt Sakura pull him down, yanking down his mask and kissing him roughly.

Kakashi grunted, his hands moving to her waist as hers snaked up his shirt. The feel of her hands on his skin ignited his body in a nostalgic heat.

Gods he’s missed her. Kakashi felt Sakura’s hands disappear before gripping his jacket, ripping it off as she bit his lip. She sighed as his jacket fell to the floor and her tongue brushed his. Pleasure raced through him as she yanked his shirt over his head and they stumbled in his apartment.

I should stop this .

His mind swirled as her tongue did the same in his mouth, her hands fumbling with his pants and he made quick work of her shirt.

She shoved him roughly on the couch. The couch slammed into the wall, his hands going wide as he looked at her.

Her face was flush, her lips swollen, and her eyes-

He swallowed thickly, beckoning her towards him.

-her eyes were glossy, her cheeks tear stained.

I should stop .

He pressed chaste kisses to her cheeks as she shimmied out of her shorts. She kissed him deeply, climbing into his lap. Her hands grasped him and he groaned, his hips moving against her. He caught her hip before tangling his hands in her hair and gently pulling her into him.

We shouldn't do this. Not with everything that's happened.

What's going to happen.

His kiss became frantic. "Please…" Sakura breathed as they came up for air. "Please, Kakashi." She shifted on his lap. "Make me forget. Just for right now.

"Let me pretend that this is forever."

He nodded, kissing her as she came home. His heart soared as she sighed into his mouth, his hands running over her body.

He nodded into their kiss, vowing to himself he would do whatever she wanted.

Because she was his. But only for now.

III

Tsunade stared at the results of the bloodwork, nausea creeping into her gut. The nurse cleared her throat. "Who was this for again, Tsunade-sama? The form didn't have a name."

"All you need to know is it's not mine. And remember your place. You don't speak of this to anyone." The nurse took the hint and bowed quickly and dashed out of her office.

Tsunade closed her eyes and counted to three before opening them again, looking down at the chart.

Of course. Because we have to make this shit show absolutely perfect .

Tsunade walked back towards her hospital office. She slipped in, careful to not open the door any wider than was necessary. Tsunade looked up, swallowing thickly.

Sakura sat in the chair opposite of her desk, her nose in someone's chart. She looked more relaxed than she had in weeks.

Tsunade wished more than anything she could bring Sakura back to

where she belonged; back to the hospital. Back to taking care of the people of Konoha. She wished Sakura's life could just go back to normal.

Tsunade looked back down at the chart and she exhaled deeply.

Normal is impossible for Team Kakashi.

"I've got your results, Sakura." Sakura looked up, her relaxed gaze slipping away into what was Sakura's now normal, strained look. Tsunade did wish this was just a social call.

Sakura held out her hand. Tsunade rounded her desk, gripping the file with white knuckles.

Sakura's brow rose. "What's wrong?"

"You thought your mental health was making you sick." Tsunade repeated what Sakura had told her an hour ago. "Fatigue, unable to eat, waking up feeling nauseous." Sakura leaned back in her chair. Tsunade gestured at her, "Not to mention you've been looking awful since you've had to move back home."

Sakura looked away, "It's been two weeks since I moved back and I've only seen Sasuke a handful of times." She wrung her hands. She shrugged, "Kakashi hasn't left my side. He'll have to eventually, but…" she nodded, "I'm glad he's there for now."

"I hope Hatake has been taking good care of you." *Damn Bastard* .

She nodded, "He's been great. He's really been there for me." Her smile faltered, "But Sasuke's going to move in soon…" Tsunade felt like she was going to be sick. Sakura sat up, a forced smile stretched on her face. "I need my mental stability to get better."

Tsuande looked at her student before looking down at the chart. "Sadly it's not your mental…instability that caused this." Sakura's eyes widened as Tsunade handed her the file.

Sakura took the file, Tsuande grimacing as her eyes scanned it. Tsunade winced as Sakura's mouth parted and her eyes widened. She looked up to Tsunade then back down at the chart and her eyes welled up with tears.

She shook her head. "I'm-I'm-" Tsunade blanched when Sakura did the last thing she expected.

She smiled. “I’m Pregnant?” Sakura looked from the chart to her stomach, touching it gently.

Tsunade was at a loss for words. She expected the tears, but not the growing smile. *Something pure in this dark time.* Tsunade let Sakura’s smile feed into her own. She did the only thing that seemed right. They would worry about everything else later.

“Congratulations Sakura.”

III

Sakura walked home in a daze, Tsunade walking beside her. The world seemed so much brighter than it had been that morning. So full of hope and optimism. She placed her hand on her stomach.

She was *pregnant* .

“Pregnant…” she whispered, smiling. Inside her was a little boy or little girl, to protect that little baby no matter what. It was all hers.

Hers and Kakashi’s.

She froze, her mind reeling back into reality. *I’m going to have a baby. Kakashi’s baby.*

But not Sasuke’s baby.

She suddenly felt dizzy. A strong arm gripped her tightly. “Are you alright, Sakura?”

This wasn’t good. “Tsunade-shishou,” she felt her heart race as realization almost dropped her to her knees, “I’m going to-” she looked around, “-Kakashi.”

“Shhh…” her teacher pulled her into a tight hug. “We’ll think about that later. Focus on that happiness you had a few minutes ago. Please.” She whispered in her ear, “For the baby.

“I’ll take care of it.”

The word didn’t hold the joy and excitement it did a minute ago.

Her mind flashed back to Yamato’s slit throat. Kakashi’s slit throat.

Her baby’s slit throat.

“I’m going to get us all killed,” she spoke hoarsely, crumpling to the ground.

Tsunade caught her with ease.

“Sakura!” It wasn’t Tsunade’s voice. It was *his* .

Kakashi

“I don’t want to see him right now.” She said quickly. *I can’t face him* .

Kakashi was at her feet, bent down to look up at her, “Are you okay?” his eyes were full of concern and something else she just gripped her Shishou and cried.

“She’s alright.” She heard Tsunade say. “It’s been a hell of a day.”

“I’ll take her inside to get some rest and food.”

“And make sure she takes these.” There was a pause, “Trust me.”

The sound of rattling filled her ears as she saw Kakashi deposit something in a pocket. “I’ll take care of everything Sakura.” Tsunade whispered into her ear. “Don’t you worry.”

She was lifted into Kakashi’s arms, where she clung to him and cried.

They were going to have a baby.

A baby that would kill them all.

III

Shikamaru stood, bored in Tsunade’s office. *I hope it’s not a long mission or anything.*

Tsunade was vigorously writing, scratching out and then writing again. She looked up at him once before writing some more.

“Here,” she barked, “Take this to Suna. And no one knows where you’re going. This goes into the hands of the Kazekage and *no. one. else.* ” Her words were icy.

He looked at it dejectedly. “Wouldn’t it be faster to have a hawk send it?”

“It needs to be secure.” Her eyes narrowed. “You will give the

response to me. No one else. Not Naruto, not Shizune. *Me* . These trips to Suna and back are your only missions for the next five months."

He gaped, "Five-five months? What a fucking dra-"

"Get going. And this is S-ranked, off the books."

He shrugged, "Whatever." He put the scroll in his back pouch and headed out the door. He paused, "You say 'off the books.' What does that mean? I'm getting paid right?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Have a good trip Nara."

Dogs on Guard

How could I be so foolish? Sakura sat on the couch, absentmindedly petting Pakkun. It had been three days since she found out she was pregnant.

Pregnant .

She sighed heavily, running her hands through her hair as she stared into the empty room.

Pakkun buried further into her lap. “Ya ‘right?” he coughed slightly, “Given the circumstances?”

Sakura sighed, “Yes. Unexpected news is all.” Pakkun let out a gruffly bark, nodding his head in understanding.

She rolled her eyes. Like a dog could understand.

“The boss should be back soon.” Pakkun yawned. Sakura grunted.

Tsunade said she’d take care of it, but what does that even mean? She unconsciously put her hand on her stomach and frowned. What was she going to do about Sasuke? It would mean that all of Sasuke’s actions would have been justified. She was cheating on him, in his mind at least. What would the elders do? What would Sasuke do?

What would Kakashi do? She didn’t even know if he wanted a baby.

Pakkun perked his ears but otherwise remained motionless. Moments later Kakashi slipped through the door carrying a box.

He set the box gingerly on the ground a few feet from the couch. “Clothes, mainly. Tsunade wants me staying here until the council kicks me out.” He crossed the room, heading to the back to the bedroom.

Sakura could only stare. After all, he *was* going to be a father soon. Dread filled her soul.

“Tsunade also wants you back at the hospital. Says it will help you get back on your feet. She’s working with the council on that.” He returned in a plain black t-shirt, his mask gone. “Says ‘the best way to handle the situation right now is to get back to normal.’ And said it’s her hospital, her rules.”

Sakura's mind reeled. *Which situation?*

Kakashi sighed, "But I have to leave." Sakura's eyes widened, "A mission." He pulled out a scroll. "It's only for two days. I can probably complete it in an afternoon."

She rolled her eyes, smiling softly. "I'll be fine."

"She's got me…" Pakkun mumbled tiredly. "…and my men."

Kakashi's scowl didn't hinder. "I talked to Naruto today." He ran a hand through his hair, "He knows something's going on. He's not happy being out of the loop."

Sakura didn't say anything. "He wants to know what happened between you and Sasuke."

"What did you say?"

"I told him to ask Tsunade-sama," he said seriously. "My Hokage has told me its need to know."

Sakura felt a small bit of relief. She didn't want anyone else to know what happened. "Sai doesn't even know *exactly* what happened."

There was a silence as Sakura stared at the floor, Kakashi moved closer. "Are you alright, Sakura?"

No . "Yes." She said softly. "Just…a lot is going on." She looked up to him to see him nodding. He walked over and sat on the couch.

"You'll feel better once you get back to work. Back to normal."

Normal. She nodded, "I hope so."

III

"You're all set. Just watch what you eat around your teammate."

"He didn't mean to." The boy mumbled. His teammate had accidently poisoned him. "He just didn't wash his hands before handing me my bento."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "First rule of poisons is to *always* wash your hands."

The boy shrugged and walked off. "Thanks, Sakura-sensei."

She watched him leave, smiling. *Sensei.* It was nice to hear it again.

It was great to be back in the hospital.

“Seems like someone is finally feeling like themselves.”

Sakura turned. Naruto strolled down the hall, Hokage robes billowing behind him. “People are going to start thinking you *are* the Hokage, wearing that.”

He grinned. “Good.”

He scooped her up in a hug. “How are you?”

It was a loaded question and she ignored it, “I’m doing good.” She nodded, “I’m doing real well. More importantly! How’s Hinata?”

“Two more months! She’s Huge!” He cackled like a fox, holding out his hands, “soon I’ll have a cute little boy to play with!”

Sakura raised a brow, “You sure it’s a boy? I didn’t think you checked?”

He scratched the back of his head, “Nope! But I gotta feeling!” he thumped his chest. She rolled his eyes. “You hungry? It is my responsibility to walk the lady back home today!” he said, puffing his chest out slightly. He deflated, “Ino had to cover at the flower shop and asked me to cover. Though I’m not sure *why* -”

“Let me get my sentry.” Naruto tilted his head, but followed as she moved towards her office. She strolled in, putting her doctor’s coat over her chair and whistled slightly, “Come on, Pakkun.”

“Pakkun?”

There was a low yawn and the sound of tiny feet as Pakkun appeared. He sat at her feet, scratching his ear. He gave him a curt nod. “We getting food?”

Sakura nodded, “Come on, let’s go.”

III

“Have you seen Sasuke?” Naruto asked over a bowl of ramen.

She bit her tongue. She pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Not in the last couple days.” She took a gingerly bite. Her morning

sickness was getting better, but she still needed to be careful. “He came by before Kakashi went on his mission, but he didn’t stay long.” She wasn’t sure if it was because of Kakashi or because he knew she still needed time.

“He knows better than to come around our house!” Pakkun said from the floor, lapping at one of Naruto’s bowls. “Not with us on guard!”

Sakura flushed, “It might be his way of saying he’s sorry.”

Pakkun growled.

“What happened?” Naruto asked softly. “No one will tell me. Sasuke says it was a misunderstanding on your part. And…I don’t believe that. You…sometimes have a one track mind when you’re mad…” he grimaced, “But to the point that I have to walk you home? That Kakashi-sensei is basically living at your house once the council said you had to stop living at his?”

“Naruto-”

“I went by your apartment, you know. Before Yamato fixed it.” He said coldly. “Everything was torn to shit. There are holes in the wall. People size holes.

“Sasuke size holes.”

“There was a…misunderstanding…” she whispered weakly. “And to fix it, we fought more violently than we should have.” She felt a chill.

Naruto frowned. “Are you not going to tell me?”

“I haven’t told anyone.” She said truthfully. She stared at her ramen. Ino told Kakashi and Tsunade. If it had been up to her, she would have kept it all to herself.

If it hadn’t been for that- She felt her stomach against her shirt. She pushed that thought back. She pushed it all back for now. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Naruto groaned. She peaked over to see his fingers buried in his hair. “And you don’t want to know.” She said softly.

“Yes I do, Sakura.” He grabbed her left arm. A memory shot through her making her charge chakra in her right gripping his wrist tightly. He stared at her, blue eyes wide. “Sakura-chan…”

She let go of his arm. “You and Sasuke are still friends?”

He narrowed his eyes slightly, “You come before him, Sakura.” His eyes blipped red.

“If you do not want to regret bringing him back,” she warned, rising out of her seat, “I wouldn’t ask again.” He looked at her lost for words. “Thank you for dinner.” She shrugged, “I’ll see you around.” She walked off, Pakkun at her heels.

III

The sounds of barks and snarls woke her. Bull and Pakkun stood at the door to the bedroom, at attention, staring down the hall as Biscuit and Akino took off down the hall.

Sakura jumped at the small knock from the front door.

Sakura looked down to the pack. Pakkun gruffed, “I will alert-”

“No.” She pulled herself out of bed. “Don’t bother.” She side-stepped the dogs to the small closet and pulled out the tanto blade Kakashi had left. She had never seen him use it, but she was certain it was sharp. She nodded to the boys before stepping out in the hall. Bull and Pakkun were at her heels as she moved towards the front door. She didn’t have to open the door to know who it was. She snapped the bolt and opened the door wide enough that Sasuke could see her head. And Bulls teeth.

He eyed her before taking a step back at the sight of Bull’s teeth and slobber. She patted Bull with her left hand as she gripped the tanto in her right.

“What do you want so late at night?”

“It’s been over a month.” He said coldly.

“It has.” she agreed, spinning the tanto in her clammy hand.

They stared at each other. She thought she should be trembling slightly, she should be scared; But she wasn’t.

“Come on, Sakura, enough of this.” Sasuke glowered. “You cannot hide from me anymore.”

She wanted to tell him she wasn’t hiding, but instead scowled. “If you don’t have anything to say, then leave.”

He stared at her for a moment then sighed, “Sakura,” He spoke firmly, “You need to come to terms with all this.” Sakura felt her chin raise, “You need to stop wasting everyone's time, *Kakashi-sensei’s* time,”

“You’re wasting my time standing here.” Sasuke rolled his eyes.

“You’re the one wasting time.” Sasuke looked exasperated. “I was supposed to start moving in weeks ago-”

“I was given two years before I had to marry you-”

He continued on like she hadn’t spoken “And it’s been nine *weeks* .” He looked at her pointedly. “I’ve had enough of your playing around-”

“I’m not-”

“You have a duty to me-”

“I have *nothing*- ”

“Enough!” The door banged loudly against Sasuke’s fist and Bull growled. Soon the hallway was filled with the small hum of dogs growling. “Sakura,” his growl had almost as much bite as the ninken at her feet, “you are going to let me in and we are going to work through your-” he paused, shaking his head, “Your insubordination-”

“Insubordination!” she laughed, “You used your Sharingan on me!”

“You were being unreasonable,” his eyes flashed red and she took a step back. The door was pushed open. Bull was almost out in the hallway, eyeing Sasuke’s leg. “And that will not happen again.”

She was about to open the door and see how unreasonable Bull was when she felt a phantom tug below her belly button.

She froze.

Baby .

She grit her teeth, holding the door so Bull’s head was the only thing that stuck out.

Sasuke’s eyes were challenging, but stayed dark. He opened his mouth when another voice came from behind him.

“It’s a bit early in the morning to be loitering in our hallway isn't it, Sasuke?” Sakura’s heart soared as Kakashi, hands in his pockets and

slouching, casually walked down the hall. Relief flooded Sakura as Bull growled, not taking his eyes away from Sasuke. Kakashi let out a low whistle and Bull retreated into the house, the dogs backing up slightly.

"'Bout time." Pakkun gruffed behind the door.

Kakashi was smiling under his mask, but his lone eye was sharper than the tanto in her hand. "Why don't you come back later?"

He stood straight, turning to face Kakashi. Even slouching, Kakashi still towered over him. "Not until she-"

"No," Kakashi's voice made even Sasuke pause. "It's time for you to leave." A shiver went down Sakrua's spine as Sasuke swallowed, standing straight.

Kakashi shrugged.

Sakura's mouth almost dropped as Sasuke tore his eyes from Kakashi's and glared at her before brushing past Kakashi, shouldering him as he past. Kakashi didn't budge, turning his head to watch him go.

After Sasuke disappeared, Kakashi exhaled, turning back to Sakura.

She took a step back, opening the door.

Tails wagged energetically on the floor behind Sakura as Kakashi carefully entered her apartment, bolting the door. He paused when he saw the tanto in her hand.

He didn't mention it as he turned and sealed the door.

Once they were sealed inside, Kakashi plucked the short sword from her hands and pulled Sakura into his arms.

She felt his quick pulse against her arms.

"Are you alright?" he said into her hair. She felt him inhale deeply before shaking his head. "You shouldn't have answered the door."

She wrapped her arms around him. She melted into him. "I'm fine. He wasn't going to do anything with Bull standing there."

Bull let out a low woof in agreement. Kakashi pulled back, one of his gloved hands brushed a piece of hair out of her face. "Sorry I was gone so long." He bent down to kiss her lips.

“I’m alright, Kakashi.” She leaned up to meet his kiss. He held her face lightly, pressing his lips hard to hers before scooping her up and taking her into the bedroom.

III

Kakashi slept lightly next to her, his hand draped lightly across her stomach. She stared at where their skin met. *Soon the baby will start showing itself.* Her heart raced. Kakashi’s grip tightened. She looked at the Copy nin and frowned. *I have to tell him , I just don’t know how.*

How would he react? She honestly didn’t know. And what about Sasuke? Shishou said she had it under control, but what did that even mean? Sakura knew she had to trust Tsunade, but it was hard. This wasn’t just about her anymore. It wasn’t just about her and Kakashi anymore.

Kakashi, she swallowed thickly as the sun started to peak in the thickly draped windows.

“I’ll tell him tonight.” She whispered to herself. Kakashi woke with a start. Sakura closed her eyes, forcing her breath deeper. She knew he had to know she was awake. She felt his eyes on her for a moment before she felt his hand press flat against her abdomen, pulling her against him. He buried his nose into her neck, his lips brushing her skin as he inhaled.

After a moment, he pulled away, kissing her temple before falling back into her neck, mumbling incoherently before he fell back asleep.

She stayed awake, ghost kicks from their baby like a timer running out.

Date Night

Sakura sat across from him. She pressed her teeth into her lower lip as she looked around the small restaurant. *Date* almost seemed to scream off her, bouncing around in his mind. He sat heavily into his seat, letting the word fester. He'd never really taken Sakura out on a date.

Not that he was really sure if this would *be* a date, but if it was, this is the kind of place he'd take her. It was closer to the residential area district; not many shinobi traveled this far into the civilian side of the village. They shouldn't be disturbed. Though Kakashi didn't really care if they were disturbed or not. Let people see him and Sakura together. He almost had half a mind to kiss her in front of everyone. With his mask up, of course.

His focus found Sakura, who had gone from looking around the empty restaurant to him. She had a strange look in her eye. "Sakura, are you alright?"

She blinked, sitting up straight. Then, she flushed the same color as her hair. Her lip pulled from her teeth and she smiled. And then… giggled.

She cleared her throat. Her eyes flashing from him to the table. "I'm just thinking about…things…" her smile quickly fell. "How was your mission?"

He watched her seriously. "It was alright." He said slowly, "Are you sure you're alright? Sasuke-he-he didn't do anything to you did he?"

She shook her head, "No." She looked back up at him and her smile returned, "But…" She took a breath, nodding, "I actually found something out a few weeks ago..." Her voice was happier than he'd heard it in a long time. "When I wasn't feeling well-"

"You're over done yourself." He said quietly, "between work and dealing with Sasuke-" *mainly dealing with Sasuke.*

"What about dealing with Sasuke?" Sakura's eyes went wide. Kakashi cursed inwardly, turning. Sasuke stood with his arms crossed. He looked between them. "What's going on here?"

"A date." Kakashi said coolly. Sakura kicked him under the table. Kakashi looked to see Sakura's face pale as she looked between him

and Sasuke. His eye lazily glanced up at Sasuke and frowned; Sasuke was glaring at Sakura. It was obvious he didn't plan on leaving. Kakashi sighed, "Sasuke. We're eating."

Sasuke ignored him. "Sakura, we have things to discuss."

Kakashi looked at Sakura who looked down at her food. She seemed to be contemplating something and Kakashi prayed it had nothing to do with hitting the Uchiha. That never worked out the way she planned.

"Sakura," Sasuke said firmly.

Kakashi put his hands on either side of his plate and made to stand but Sakura quickly got to her feet. "I'll be right back." She put a hand on his shoulder, pushing him back in his seat. Her hand lingering as she walked passed. Sasuke stared at him before following Sakura out the restaurant.

Kakashi sighed, looking back down at his food frowning. *Wonderful.*

After five minutes, a red faced Sakura came stalking back into the restaurant. "Everything's okay." Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. He only nodded.

The rest of dinner was in a strange silence.

After Kakashi paid, he helped Sakura out of her chair and wrapped his arm around her waist protectively as they walked out in the cool air. Sakura giggled softly, "So chivalrous tonight." Kakashi didn't say anything, his eyes scanned and chakra searched for Sasuke. He led her towards her apartment.

Is he going to interrupt us? Kakashi thought, looking down at Sakura. She was biting her lip, her eyes a million miles away. "Sakura?" His hands squeezed her hip softly, bringing her out of her thoughts. She looked up at him, her eyes glistening with tears. He rounded her, hand trailing up to her shoulder, and his other hand finding her other blade, "Are you okay, Sakura?" he looked into her glossy green eyes. She sniffed lightly before nodding.

"I'm fine." She lied. Kakashi let his right hand trail her neck before grabbing the back of her head and pulling her into a hug. He felt her hands quickly grasp the back of his shirt, fingers digging into his back. "I promise." Her voice was raspy and high. His hands ran through her silky strands as they stood in the middle of the street three blocks

from the apartment.

“There was something you wanted to say earlier.” He whispered into her hair.

She shook her face against his shirt, “It’s nothing.” It almost came out as a sob but he tightened his grip. He felt Uchiha’s chakra approach, but he didn’t care. “I’m so sorry Kakashi.” She sobbed. “I never meant for this to happen.”

Kakashi could see Sasuke coming towards them but he didn’t let Sakura go. “I wish things could have been different too.” He whispered.

She shook her head, gripping his shirt with white knuckles.

He sensed Sasuke too late. Kakashi spun, knocking Sasuke’s outreached hand out of the way as he stood in front of Sakura. Sasuke’s face was unreadable as he tilted his head to the side. “Well, isn’t this a romantic sight?”

Kakashi glanced up to see Sai sitting in a tree a few feet away. Sai gave a quick wave before Kakashi’s attention was drawn back to Sasuke. “What do you want?”

“I'd like another word with Sakura.”

“No.” Kakashi said simply, but his words were sharp.

Sasuke didn’t back down, “She is my wife.”

Kakashi pulled his shoulders back. “Not yet she’s not.”

Kakashi and Sasuke glared at one another before Sakura sighed loudly. Kakashi felt her hand on the small of his back. “It will only take a minute.” Her voice was weary. She and Kakashi shared a knowing look before slowly nodding. He glared at Sasuke before moving to join Sai. Leaning against the trunk, Kakashi watched.

III

“You two seemed pretty close there.” Sasuke said evenly as Sakura stood a few feet from him.

She crossed her arms, her heart hammered in her chest. “What do you want, Sasuke?”

“Is that why you picked him to look out for you? I thought it was just because he was the Copy Ninja.”

“Not this again, first Sai, now Kakashi?” Sakura internally screamed. “When are you going to stop with this?”

He didn't take the bait. “He said you were on a date.”

“Don't be stupid,” she hated how much it hurt that she and Kakashi had never really been on a date before. And never would. She lifted her chin, glaring. “And it wouldn't matter anyway. I still have ten months, Sasuke.”

“You should be at home with *me* . Your husband.”

Anger flared. “Not yet. And I will do what I want-”

H“You are *mine* .” His voice was low as he stalked towards her. She glanced at Kakashi, who looked like he was about to strike before she looked back. She was met with Sasuke’s red eyes.

“ *Yours* ?” She laughed. “You might have the Elders convince that you have changed your ways, but you’re still the same self absorbed little boy you were when you were twelve-”

Pain shot through her arm and before she knew it, she was on her knees, his hand gripping her arm, driving it backwards away from her body. She heard Kakashi rush towards them as her mind chanted *Baby* with every beat of her heart. Sasuke twisted harder, driving her elbow into her side. She felt tendons and bones hitting their stress points as he dislocated her shoulder.

“What are you hiding from me?” The tomoes in his eyes spun. “You’ve been hiding something for a long time, and it’s time you tell me what it is, Sakura. I’ve forgiven you for sleeping around like the whore you’ve-”

White hot anger course through her. Sakura felt her free hand move. She blinked and she was standing, chakra pulsing in her hand and holding Sasuke's delicate wrist. “Call me a *whore* again.” She dared, watching his eyes gloss over as his knee hit the ground. “I have my own life and I can do what I damn well please.” She released his wrist, grabbing her upper arm, slamming her shoulder blade back into place with a loud *pop* . “You don’t own me.”

He smirked, looking up at her, “Not yet.”

Sakura reacted. With a chakra charged fist, she slapped Sasuke.

It should have stung. She should have felt *something* . But she only recognized the reality of his words.

He's right. Not yet.

Sakura shook her head, taking a step back. She felt talons dig into her bicep. She looked up and saw sharingans spinning quickly. She slammed her eyes shut as she felt the wind knocked out of her.

She fell backwards. She braced herself when she felt a sudden jolt and a strong arm underneath her. Her eyes peaked open to see silver hair and deadly cold gray eyes.

"You should go and get that looked at." Kakashi's hands dug into her waist, holding her tightly against him.

"This is none of your business." Sasuke stood straight, cradling his wrist as blood ran down his nose.

"It is now." He righted Sakura, but didn't let go. "Let's go home." Kakashi whispered.

Home. She nodded, exhaustion hitting her like a tidal wave.

Kakashi didn't wait any longer.

"She's mine, Hatake!" Sasuke called after her. "She's hiding something from me and I will find out."

"I'm sure you will." He gave a small wave.

III

"I hate this." Kakashi growled, pacing his living room. The moment they'd entered his apartment he'd ripped his headband and mask off, running his hand through his hair as he paced. Sakura was sitting on the couch, scratching Pakkun's ears. He stopped, turning to face her, so many emotions washing over his face she couldn't pinpoint just one. "This is-I hate this!" he growled, returning to his pacing.

"You think I don't?" She said softly. *Not yet* circled in her head.

Not yet.

She trained for years to be strong. To be able to protect herself; she

was going to be in control of her own life, but now…

“Sakura,” Kakashi was standing over her now, his hair casting shadows over her from the lights on the ceiling. His red eye swirled softly and his grey eye full of emotion.

“Let’s run…” her mind cried, wishing he would whisper those soft words. Tsunade could make it work. No one would know where they’d gone.

But Kakashi could never leave. And Sakura couldn't ask, even with-

“No one would blame you if you ran, you know.” He whispered. His hand carefully cupped her face. “You deserve to be free.” Kakashi grimaced, pulling his hands away, “And I can't keep you safe.”

Sakura felt a knot form in her throat as her shoulders shook. She threw her arms around him, breathing heavy, shallow breathes. He pulled her close in him, making Pakkun have to retreat to the other side of the couch.

“And you?” she sobbed. “Would you come with me?”

She knew the answer already, but hearing it hurt all the same. “You need to be free Sakura.” He whispered.

No.

She nodded, burying her face in neck, inhaling it deeply. His arms were around her, protecting her from the world around them.

But she felt so alone.

Not Everything is Black and White

“Um, Tsunade-baa-chan…” Naruto looked down at the small bundle in Sakura’s arms. “Its hair is red.”

“ *Her* hair is red.” Hinata corrected, looking fondly over at the baby in Sakura’s arms.

I wonder what color my baby’s hair will be.

“Her hair is red.” Sakura wasn’t sure if Naruto was skeptical about the red hair or the her. Or the whole bundle.

“Yes, Naruto. It is.” Tsunade tried to sound strong, but the small bundle made her eyes soft.

Naruto sighed, “Well, you see Hinata’s hair is black,” Naruto explained, “mine is blond,” Sakura bit her lip as she glanced at Tsunade, who was scowling, “shouldn’t its hair be…one or the other?”

“ *Her* .” Hinata corrected again. Sakura watched Hinata’s smile widen. “She’s perfect.” Hinata’s thumb brushed the baby’s soft skin.

“She is,” Tsunade agreed. She grasped Naruto’s shoulder. “Your mother’s hair was that exact shade of red, Naruto.”

Naruto gasped, his fingers lightly touching the red ball of fluff. “Really?”

Tsunade nodded, “yes.” She looked at Hinata, who was glowing. “Your father won’t be too excited,” she warned. “He didn't like Kushina either.”

Hinata didn’t look up, “She’s a perfect fit into the Uzumaki family.”

Sakura’s stomach bursting into butterflies, “What is her name?”

Naruto made a low whining sound, fingers wiggling in front of Sakura, who carefully handed over the baby. Bright blue eyes opened, gazing with the same wonderment as her father. Hinata giggled.

“He wanted to name him Minato, after the fourth Hokage.” She gave Sakura a knowing smile, “So her name will be Mina.”

“Mina…” Naruto said airily, a dreamy smile almost split his face.

“Baby Mina.”

Tsunade frowned, “Give that baby back to his mother before you drop him.”

“ *Her* .” Hinata chided again.

Tsunade shrugged, turning to Sakura. “Come on, let’s leave the small family to be.”

Sakura stood, smiling as Naruto sat on the edge of the bed with Hinata as they held their baby. “Too bad Kakashi-sensei wasn’t here.” He said to Sakura, making her stomach drop. He grinned, “But I don’t know if he’d know what to do with a baby.”

Sakura smiled weakly. “He’ll be back soon.”

Not soon enough .

III

“How are you feeling?” Tsunade asked as she and Sakura entered her hospital office. “Are you taking care of yourself?” Sakura nodded, closing the door softly.

“I’m surprised you haven’t come looking for Hatake. Or asked why he was chosen for this mission.” Tsunade sat down at her desk, flipping through folders and scrolls. “A four month mission.” Tsunade flicked a folder in front of Sakura. Sakura picked it up, flipping it open. The folder almost fell from her hands.

It was her medical chart. With pictures of *her* baby. *Their* baby. “Funny, four months…” Sakura was barely registering. She picked up the picture, holding it in two hands.

This is our baby .

She licked her lips, her eyes burning as she looked up at Tsunade. Her right hand came to the small bump on her stomach.

“You have eight months until your ‘marriage,’” Tsunade did the air quotes. “And three and a half months until you…” Tsunade gestured to Sakura.

Sakura wiped her face with the back of her hand.Kakashi would be gone when their baby was born. He wouldn’t have to see what happened to them, no matter how bad it was.

“Why are you telling me this?” she said wearily.

“I have a mission for you.” Tsunade tossed another folder at her. “A simple mission. Go to the south and help train medics; teach them how to make medicines and simple poisons antidotes.”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed-”

“I’m Hokage.”

She paused, looking from the folder to her Hokage, “How long.” Sakura’s voice was empty.

“Five months.”

“…Five months, Shishou?”

“You’ll only be there for six weeks. You’ll come back to *me* then. And once the baby is born, I will send you both away.

“Hatake will escort you to your final destination.”

Sakura’s heart pulsed in her ears. Her head spun as she struggled to breath.

She shook her head, “Wait, Shishou…what?” Sakura felt something stir in her soul.

“Sakura.” Tsunade’s voice was soft. She leaned over the table. “I-” Sakura watched her teacher struggle to find the right words. “You-deserve better than this.”

“It’s okay Shishou, I’m alright.” Sakura looked down and put her hand on her stomach. “You know what.” She whispered, looking down at her stomach. “Kakashi told me, before he left, that I should run.” She laughed. “He said that no one would blame me.” She rubbed the small bump on her stomach. It wasn’t noticeable to anyone but her yet, but soon she wouldn’t be able to hide it. She frowned, thinking of the many different ways Sasuke would react.

Tsunade smiled, “He did now?” Sakura raised a brow and Tsunade shook her head. “You leave first thing tomorrow.”

Sakura rose to leave, bowing slightly.

“And Sakura?” Tsunade couldn’t hide her grin. “It’s a boy.”

III

“So Sakura is finally leaving the village!” Naruto grinned into his ramen. He pulled her to Ichiraku’s once Tsunade kicked him out of the hospital. “It’s her last mission!” he looked over her, “You know,” he elbowed her in the arm, “I should be Hokage then!” he almost was bouncing out of his seat.

She smiled sadly; this was the last time she was going to do this. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Oh, don’t cry, Sakura!” he patted her back softly; pulling her into a hug, “Baby Mina will be here when you get back!” she laughed as he winked at her, “And I won’t tell Sasuke where you’re going. I’ll tell him you’re going to Suna or something.” He whispered into her ear before pulling back, continuing to scarf down his noodles.

Sakura nodded, looking at Naruto. He had matured over the past year. “You’ll make a great Hokage.” She said shakily. She closed her eyes, willing the tears back. She felt strong arms encircle her.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but you know I’m always here for you.” He kissed her temple.

“I’m sorry.” She said, wrapping her arms around him, pulling her close, “I can’t tell you.” She whispered.

Naruto was silent for a few minutes, hugging her back with the same fierceness. “You’re…you’re coming back from this mission right?” Sakura gripped him tighter. They were silent for a moment before Naruto spoke, his voice slightly shaky. “I will-I will see you again.” It wasn’t a question.

She choked, nodding, “Yes, of course, Naruto.” She felt him smile.

“What’s going on here?” Naruto tensed at the cold voice of Uchiha Sasuke. Naruto spun in his chair to face his once rival, half blocking Sakura. “Eating ramen.” He said obviously.

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed, “Why?”

“Because ramen is delicious.” Naruto said coolly, leaning against the table behind him, blocking Sakura a bit more.

Sasuke closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Sakura, I need to talk to you.” His voice was suddenly softer, pushing past Naruto and

grabbing her elbow softly. “Please?” with a little more force she was lifted out of her chair. She looked back to Naruto, who looked slightly lost. She gave him a weak smile and gave him a small wave. Sasuke continued to drag her towards the Uchiha compound, loosening his grip as they passed through the gates. They remained silent as he brought her to the largest house in the compound.

They traveled through the house and into the empty courtyard in the back. He let go and took a few steps back, his hands going on his hips and studying her for a few moments. Sakura lifted her head and stared him down with equal intensity. She wasn’t going to let her fear show.

His eyes met hers and he took a deep breath. “I want to apologize.” He looked at his feet. “I’ve-I’ve been an ass.” He spoke softly, shifting his weight from one foot to the next.

Sakura stared at him, dumbfounded. His eyes stayed on his feet as he shifted from one leg to the other. His hands were in his pockets, shifting uncomfortably. “I just have been so worried about everything. Everything is so different now…being back in the village and all…” he finally looked at her with softest eyes she had seen since he left the village all those years ago. “I came back to this village for me. I came to revive my clan. That-it’s the only thing that I’ve been thinking about. It consumed me.” He looked over at a dying tree. “I have this tendency of-being single minded.” Sakura snorted. He gave her an uneasy smile.

“So that gives you the okay to use your Sharingan on me?” she snapped, her hands on her hips. She felt the baby move slightly, warning her to keep her temper in check.”

He didn’t back down. “I used it because I thought you were cheating on me. I was angry.”

“That’s no excuse!”

“Were you?”

Sakura hesitated slightly, making Sasuke smirked, his hands going over his chest. “You tried to turn me against my own team.” She seethed. “Make it so I didn’t-couldn’t trust them.”

“Keep them in their place, out of your bed.” He said smugly.

“Some apology this is.”

Sasuke froze, frowning. His hands dropped, “Listen, can we-can we just start over? Start from the beginning? I promise to be better to you.” He took a small step towards her. She took a step back. “I will be the person you’ve always wanted- deserved me to be. I just need a chance.”

The baby pushed against her, her eyes dropped. She was reminded that it didn’t matter what she said.

She’d dug her own grave-for her, and her baby.

When she didn’t speak, he sighed. “Hey! I’m honestly trying!”

“And then the next time.” She said softly, before looking back up at him. “What about next time. We get married, and I have lunch with Naruto. Dinner with Sai, train with Yamato? You going to use the Sharingan on me again?” Sasuke stood straighter. “You have a one track mind now? How about when we seal the deal? You think that it being official will make *you* any different?” she took a brave step closer, “I tried being faithful to you but you made being around you insufferable!” He looked bored, fueling her anger. “I didn’t cheat on you because we weren’t together to begin with. Once *this* ” she gestured frantically between them, “ *this* became real, I would have done my mission like a good Shinobi.”

“Would?” Sasuke smirked evilly, making Sakura freeze. “Why ‘would’ Sakura? Shouldn’t it be ‘when.’”

Oh god .

Sakura felt Sai and Yamato approaching at a fast pace. Sasuke closed the gap. “I will have my clan Sakura.” He said quietly. “I don’t know what you and your precious team are planning, but you will be my wife or my corpse, you understand me?”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed, challenging him, but her stomach dropped as she felt a strong hand on her back.

“Everything okay here?”

Sakura’s eyes widened. “Shishou.”

Tsunade stood between Sai and Yamato, her hands on her hips. “Naruto told me you drug her out of Ichiraku.” Tsunade’s glare made Sasuke back off. “You know not to talk to her without ANBU.”

Sasuke bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Hokage-sama.”

Tsunade turned to Yamato, “Take her home. You,” she looked at Sai, “Stay with him.”

“Come on, Sakura-chan.” Yamato said softly, touching her elbow, making her wince slightly. Sasuke laughed, “In their place.”

Sakura almost spoke, but Tsunade’s glare dried her throat. She followed Yamato out of the compound and to her home to get ready for her journey.

The baby kicked.

III

AN: So! This…wasn’t the ending that I had planned. I got a very nice review from Amrun who explained to me their concern for the fact that Sasuke’s character being a complete douche (this is all paraphrased) seems…a bit random and that Amrun didn’t understand *why* he was this way.

And this had been my fear the whole time writing him! I’m so bad at writing Sasuke!!! I have hated Sasuke’s character for sooo long, it’s quite difficult for me to write him without a complete and total bias, which isn’t necessarily fair to him. But! I also can’t make him a super nice dude because then it makes Sakura look like a whorey bitch.

So! I *really* hope this last bit (the story not the AN) helps. :-/

Obito

Tsunade met her at the village gate at dawn. “Are you ready to go?”

“Please,” Sakura yawned. “Sasuke has been replaced by an imposter or is being possessed.” She looked back down the empty streets. “He was at my house until four telling me how ‘lucky he is to have a strong, wonderful, shinobi as a future wife.’” she grumbled. “Not sure what crawled up his ass.”

“Naruto, I think.”

Sakura rose a brow. Tsunade looked behind them, “Sending you on this bogus mission wasn't just a power play on my end. It was his as well.

“The Elders didn't want you to leave but the future Hokage agreed that you might need some space. To reset. To catch your breath before you two really sit down and figure out how you're going to make this work.”

“Except you won't be coming back. Not really.”

Sakura felt a heavy weight fall on her chest. She nodded. She looked back behind them again. She would see Konoha again. One last time.

And then she would be off…to somewhere else.

They were silent as Sakura’s mind whirled.

Her hand found her small swell.

“You will be okay, Sakura.” Tsunade said briskly. “I trained you to be strong in mind and body. I trust you to make smart decisions from now on.”

Sakura placed a hand on her stomach. “I will, Shishou.”

Tsunade patted her shoulder affectionately. “You’ll make me proud.

“You'll keep me updated on your progress, both in the mission and your health.

“You will meet me at the edge of Fire in six weeks and I will escort you to the hospital where you will stay until you are ready to travel.

You will be put in a ward where only you three will be able to access."

"Th-three, Shishou?" Sakura was afraid of what that meant.

"Sakura, I have every intention of telling Kakashi when he arrives. For him to be there. Depending on what you look like when you arrive, we'll pull him early from his mission.

"We've kept it from him for all of your safety, butKakashi will escort you to Suna. That way he knows that both you and his child are safe."

Sakura's mind flashed to nightmares she'd been having. Where Sasuke stands over Kakashi's dying body, his red eyes glowing with rage. "But-"

"It is not fair to him and you know this." Sakura stared at the ground. "Had you never planned on telling him?"

Sakura's eyes burned. She swallowed thickly. "His life is here, as a Shinobi of Leaf. I did not want him to make a choice between that and me-us." Her hand rubbed her stomach.

"Sakura." Tsunade's firm hand on her shoulder. Sakura looked into her teacher's warm eyes. "He would always pick you." She said softly. "But I can't let my best ninja go because he knocked up his girlfriend." Her eyes became serious, "Not when it would put my best medic and her baby into jeopardy. He will take you to Suna, where you will be given asylum.

"But Kakashi will have to return. You going rogue, we can justify. But without explaining, or allowing people to jump to conclusions, Kakashi will have to return."

They stopped walking where the trees thickened. Sakura eyed the small trail she would take, her heart hammering in her chest. "This is where I leave you." Tsunade took a step back, looking Sakura up and down. "I will see you in a few months."

Sakura readjusted her pack before giving her teacher a short wave. "Thank you, Shishou." She turned and made her way south.

III

Sakura cursed her Shishou, her baby and Kakashi.

In the six weeks she spent in the remote village, she had grown ten times her normal size (or so it seemed) and it didn't help that the local midwife told her she had the largest belly of any women she had seen in a few decades.

Great!

Besides now being as wide as she was tall, her time in the south was relaxing. Until a few weeks before she left, she was out collecting and preparing medicines and showing the midwife and a few apprentice doctors' basic remedies. Being able to focus on her work and not worrying about anything (or anyone) made her pregnancy more bearable.

But now she waddled towards the meeting spot cursing everyone, even the baby. The bright moon lit her way through the trees. Her hands gripping the bottom of her bloated stomach as she felt the big baby kick and prod at her insides. This baby is so huge. And she was pretty sure there was a pebble in her shoe. Not like she could see her shoes. She hadn't been able to see her feet in a week.

The baby kicked her again. In the bladder.

Sakura groaned, taking a shaky breath and trudged on.

No wonder Shishou never had any kids…

Though Sakura complained, and hated her discomfort, she became more excited as the days went by.

My little baby will be here soon. She smiled, standing straight, stretching her back as far as she could and sighed as it popped.

"You're as big as a house!" Sakura froze as she heard Shishou's voice echo around her.

"Ha, ha." Sakura groaned, her hand going to her stomach, the baby pushing against her fingers. She smiled. "They are almost ready."

"Do you have a name?" Tsunade pulled the light pack off Sakura's shoulders, making Sakura sigh in relief.

"Obito." Sakura felt Obito press against her hand, "He was Kakashi's teammate."

"I knew Obito." Tsunade nodded, "A bit ironic, but I think it will suit

him.”

“Ironic?”

Tsunade smiled, “Obito was an Uchiha.”

Sakura sighed, “Of course he was.” Still, Sakura wasn’t going to change it. Obito was an important person to Kakashi and he had lost him too soon.

The same as their baby.

They walked in a somber silence.

“We must have forgotten to tell Sasuke that you were leaving on a mission,” Tsunade said lightly. “He’s been beyond angry. He was kicked out of the council room when you first left. Naruto has been working with him on his temper, but the villagers are starting to realize his true colors.” Sakura’s eyes widened. Tsunade smiled lightly, looking down at her apprentice. “But he won’t have time for that anymore.

“Naruto became Hokage a few weeks ago.”

“Really?” Sakura’s heart soared. “He did it,” she whispered. “Now he can wear his robes with pride.”

Tsunade laughed, “He hasn’t had time to parade around the village in that stuffy old robe since his inauguration.

“He wanted to wait until you and Kakashi got back, but Hinata convinced him.” Tsunade had a look in her eye. “Besides, our plan works out better this way.”

“Does-does Hinata-”

“No. Only Shizune, myself, and Gaara.”

Sakura went silent, letting her mind wrap around everything.

“We’re getting close to the village.” Tsunade spoke softly. “Be cautious.”

The night was dark as they entered the front gates, Shizune waiting near the check-in station. “She knocked the guards out with a small sleeping draught. They should be awake by the time we make it to the hospital.”

Sakura gripped her stomach nervously.

The trip was uneventful. Sakura was glad; she wasn't sure she wanted anyone to see her sneaking through the village looking like this. Her hand absently trailed over the swell of her stomach as the bright lights from the hospital twinkled in the distance. Sakura's heart leapt in her throat as they quietly made their way towards it.

Little Obito pressed against her hand, almost reassuringly.

They entered the quiet hospital, the lights almost blinding.

Sakura walked as quickly as she could, trailing Tsunade as Shizune stood at her side. They came to a dead end hallway where Tsunade held up her hand. With a burst of Chakra, a seal released on the wall, revealing a new hospital corridor. Sakura gasped.

Tsunade gestured her forward. "ANBU ER."

Shizune took Sakura by the elbow and smiled, "Let's get you off your feet."

Sakura almost cried in relief.

III

Of course Kakashi's baby wouldn't show up on time.

Sakura drummed her fingers against her stomach. She had to be wider than she was tall now. She glanced over at Tsunade, who was flipping through a copy of Icha Icha, lip curling.
"That's medically impossible." she scoffed before flipping the page.

Sakura groaned; she had been trapped in this damn room for weeks on bed rest and the baby seemed very content in staying put.

"Will he ever come out?" she poked her stomach. Obito poked back.

"Give him some time." Tsunade said distractedly. She made a face before rolling her eyes and flipping the page.

"This will be the last time in this boy's life he is late for anything." Sakura fell back against the bed.

"Look at the bright side, Kakashi might be here in time for the birth."

Sakura huffed, Tsunade had called Kakashi back a week ago, but they

only received word he was on his way back yesterday. Sakura wasn't sure where he'd been, but Tsunade hadn't been pleased.

Sakura squirmed in her bed.

"That is your fault." Tsunade said bitterly, tossing the book on the bed. "You should have told him."

"You said that it was better this way." Sakura whined.

Tsunade shrugged, "You should have still told him.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Sakura felt a wave of something wash over her.

She felt like she wet herself. Sakura moved as quickly as she could, trying to sit up. "Uh…Tsunade-Shishou…"

Tsunade shifted in her seat, her eyes alert. She moved to stand, but spun as Sakura's door slammed open.

Shizune stood gripping the door. Her face was ashen. "Sasuke's at the main desk." Sakura's heart dropped as she forced herself up. Shizune's eye met hers and she froze, "demanding to see Sakura!"

"How does she know she's here?" Tsunade barked.

Shizune's voice trembled. "I-I-I don't know, Tsunade-sama."

Pain pulsed through Sakura as pressure began to build. "Shi-Shishou!" She clutched her stomach. "He-he has bad timing!"

Tsunade looked at Sakura before stalking out of the door. "Deep breathes, Sakura. I'll get rid of him." She gave Sakura a once over, "We've got time."

"Thanks…" Sakura groaned as pain shot through her.

She really wished Kakashi was there.

III

It had taken twelve hours, but Obito was alive and healthy.

Sakura held the small boy to her chest, smiling as tears ran down her cheeks. "Hey there, baby." She tapped his nose lightly. The baby garbled, squinting his face up.

Tsunade was already stripped of her gloves and bibs. “Keep him quiet.” She ordered, stalking out the door.

Sakura held a baited breath as he held the baby close to her. “She was able to keep Sasuke at bay, but I don’t think it will be for too long. He’s not stupid.”

Sakura nodded, fingers rubbing against soft skin. She kissed him gently on the forehead. “Don’t worry, Obito. Tsunade-baa-chan will protect us.”

Shizune giggled.

The sound of heavy footsteps and Tsunade’s booming voice echoed through the hall.

“You do not have the authorization to be here, Uchiha-”

“Where is she?!” Sasuke snarled. Fear shot through Sakura as she and Shizune locked eyes. “I know you came from this hallway. I know she’s here!” Sakura pressed baby Obito to her chest as Shizune slowly turned, senbon sliding into her hands from her sleeves.

“There is nothing in this hallway!” Tsunade’s voice boomed. “I told you to get the hell out of my hospital and yet you’re still here!”

Footsteps boomed. Sakura imagined Tsunade cornering Sasuke, glaring up at him as she poked him so hard his sternum cracked. “I have patients in this hospital that do not need your screaming.” She seethed. They sounded right outside the door. “Sakura is still out on her mission. She will not return-”

“She is in this hospital,” Sasuke said, cutting her off. “I can sense her.

“So tell me where she is.”

“You’re letting your infatuation with her cloud your judgment. Why would she come here before going home?”

“Infatuation!?” Saskue laughed. “That bitch will bear me heirs to my clan. Between the two of us, our offspring will be unstoppable. I would hardly call this infatuation.”

“It’s what I’m owed by this village; an Uchiha clan that is stronger than ever.”

“You shit.”

“And I don’t care what she does in between. As long as it doesn’t involve doing someone else.” There was a pregnant pause. “I know she’s here.” Sasuke’s voice was low and threatening, “And you’re right; why would she come here after months of being gone, away from the eyes of the village, before coming home to me?

“Unless all my concerns I laid out to the Elders are true. That Sakura was going against what was ordered by her village. And that the Hokages were behind it.” Sakura kissed the top of her baby’s head as Sasuke’s voice got closer. “I doubt the Elders would like to hear not only of Sakura’s insubordination, and her clear lack of the chain of command, but your own.

“This was all put in place so the other clans wouldn’t rise up. I’m sure everyone would understand if I kill her for-” A loud thud echoed in the hall making Sakura and Shizune flinch.

And then silence.

A beat later, Tsunade stormed into the room. Her face was red and her eyes like ice.

“You leave now.”

The Valley of the End

"You will go to the Valley of the End." Tsunade said as she attached a small knapsack to the sling Obito was nestled in. "Then you will cross over to Sound and head west towards Suna. You will stay out of the Fire Country, you understand?" Tsunade grasped Sakura by the shoulders, tears welling up in her eyes. "We can hold him off for a few days. Be safe, be quick." Tsunade pulled Sakura into a bone crushing hug. Sakura looked over her teacher's shoulder to Shizune, who had fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'm sending word immediately. They will be waiting. I will come when I can." Tsunade stepped back and looked away.

"Go!" she barked.

Sakura didn't hesitate. She took to the trees.

III

The sound of a baby's cry jolted Sakura awake with a start. She scrambled up as her body went through the motions of preparing to feed. She should feel groggy, but adrenaline still coursed through her as she pulled Obito close. Her ears strained to hear *everything* as Obito made small noises of approval as he gulped down precious milk.

He'll know I'm gone. Sakura looked down at the bundle in amazement. *No one knew I was there. No one. Not even Ino.* Tears welled in her eyes at the thought of her friend. *I can never go back. I can never see Ino again.*

She and Ino would never have coffee together; share each other's hopes and fears. Ino will never be there again to pick out her outfits, tell her that her make-up was terrible. To bring her flowers when she needed them. To sit and just laugh till their sides hurt. Sakura's throat closed as tears rolled down her face. She held Obito closer.

I'll never see Ino again. Not with Sasuke out for her blood. For little Obito's blood.

I won't see anyone again. Not Naruto, not Hinata, not Kakashi.

Guilt hit her like a punch to the gut.

Kakashi will never know his son. His little baby. His little Obito.

Our little Obito.

Sakura took a deep breath. There was no point in thinking about that now.

Obito burped, green eyes opening wide, staring in wonder at her. Sakura smiled. Kakashi's words of running away rang in her ears. *Everyone will understand.*

Please understand Kakashi.

She shook her head, standing up, she stretched before placing the small baby back in the sling. She stretched her arms as she walked slowly to the edge of the cave. She sent her chakra out, sensing for anything.

Nothing.

With a nod she skidded across the water, heading west. *It should take four days to reach Suna.*

I'll do it in two.

The Chase

Naruto wasn't sure what he thought would happen when he brought Sasuke back to the village. He knew it was unrealistic to think Team Seven would reunite and for everything to be like it was. He wasn't stupid. Well, not anymore.

The first few weeks were awkward. Sasuke had never been particularly talkative, but Naruto hadn't expected the full silent treatment. But time went on and Sasuke started feeling better, (was acquitted), he seemed to be acting like his old self again.

Naruto was happy.

They started to spar a few times a week. Simple taijutsu, nothing too crazy (and always with ANBU close). After a few weeks, Sasuke started asking about Sakura; she had been away on a mission with Kakashi and Naruto prattled on about how strong she'd gotten and how amazing of a woman she'd become.

In hindsight, Naruto hated himself for that.

When the notice about the 'wife-picking' went up, Naruto felt betrayed. And wary. Like everyone else, he was worried about Sakura. His words to Sasuke haunted him at night, making him dread the day that Sakura would have to stand like a piece of meat in front of the elders and Sasuke.

Sasuke…

He kept a close eye on Sasuke after that. He seemed to be his old self, but something was off. A gleam in his eye that Naruto couldn't place. He tried to keep close to Sakura too, but he knew she was strong. That she could take care of herself. And he knew she'd get mad if he tried to help her. So he acted like nothing was going on, keeping a close eye on Sasuke when he could.

When Sakura was given the 'honor' of being Sasuke's fiancé, Naruto wanted to be sick.

This…this was all his fault.

Naruto hoped that things would get better. And Sasuke did get better. He seemed more comfortable in the village, learning his new place in

it.

But Sakura seemed like she was slowly fading away. She tried to stay strong, to look strong, but even Naruto could see the dark circles under her eyes. How pale and thin she'd gotten.

Naruto absorbed himself in his training, in missions, hoping that he was just imagining it.

He laughed with the group as Sakura told them how Sasuke was jealous of Sai. But he felt an uneasy weight settle in his stomach. When Sasuke looked like he was ready to kill Sakura when he found the two of them together after he told her about Mina, Naruto didn't want to leave her.

It didn't seem right. But he did nothing.

In hindsight, Naruto was an idiot.

Naruto *knew* something bad was going to happen; Sasuke was becoming more reckless in their sparring sessions. He was angry at something (someone), taking his frustrations out on Naruto. He was becoming moodier, usually only talking about how he hated the new Team Kakashi-about how he couldn't wait for Sakura to be rid of all these men.

Naruto rationalized Sasuke's brashness-Sakura was a beautiful woman and was very close with her team. He'd had to explain their team's closeness to Hinata once. And Naruto still got a little bit of the jealousy bug whenever Kiba had his arm around Hinata, no matter how friendly.

But Sasuke's anger seemed over the top.

And then Sai had shown up at his house, blood running down his face, saying Sakura was safe at their senpai's house, Naruto couldn't hide behind his fear anymore. He *had* to know.

But no one was talking!

Ino, who usually was more than willing to loosen her lips to a bit of gossip, only looked like she was going to cry at the mention of Sakura. Sasuke brushed it off and Kakashi ignored him. Tsunade told him to mind his own business.

And poor Sakura, looking like she needed someone-needed *him* , her

best friend, she shut him out.

And it was all because of Sasuke. He knew it.

And I brought him back .

III

This is all my fault.

Two days after Tsunade came to his office stating something had happened to Sakura while on her mission in the south.

Sakura is missing.

Naruto sent out search parties; the first group went south, to the village Sakura had last been seen at, but they said she had been gone for weeks. Naruto, trapped behind his desk, sent parties to the four other hidden villages. Sasuke, fresh from the hospital, demanded to go. Naruto tried to convince him to stay here, with him, but he was manic.

The Elders approved and Naruto put him in the group that went to Suna with Sai and Yamato (he had wanted to wait until Kakashi got back but Sasuke was adamant on leaving *now*). Like with the other groups, he sent a formal letter requesting their assistance.

But he sent a letter apologizing for whatever Sasuke might try to do that would beat them there.

Naruto's mind raced as he stood alone in his office, staring out the windows.

What happened to you, Sakura? Where did you go?

Naruto looked around, listening to the empty room before turning back to the window. *Why did you run?*

Because of course she ran. That was obvious. Her life was quickly spiraling out of control. Sasuke's grip on her was tightening every day.

And it was *his* fault.

I should have killed him. I should have never brought him back . Naruto gritted his teeth, slamming his hand on the glass. Thin cracks quickly spidered away from impact. *Why?!*

“You can’t blame yourself, Naruto.” Hinata’s strong voice came from behind him. “She wouldn’t want you to blame yourself.” He heard the small gargled noises of his small child. He felt his body relax slightly.

“I should have never brought him back.”

“You didn’t know this would happen!” Hinata’s voice was soft, but firm. “She would want you to be strong and lead this village through this.”

“*I* want to kill him.” Naruto’s voice wasn’t his own as he saw his own eyes flash red in the fractured glass. “For what he’s done to her.” *What I’ve done to her.*

“You *will not* blame yourself for this.” Hinata’s eyes were hard as ice, “You will find her or you won’t.

“And we’re going to make it so this can’t happen to another woman. For Sakura.” Her tone left nothing up for debate.

“You’re right.” Naruto whispered, turning to hug his wife and kiss his baby girl before turning back to the window, pulling his girls into a hug. *Be safe Sakura, wherever you are.*

III

Shikamaru took a long drag of his cigarette as he leaned against the Kazekage’s tower. It was hot. Ungodly hot and the sun had barely started to rise. It was almost too hot to let the hot smoke burn his lungs.

Almost.

Temari rolled her eyes, putting her hands on her hips. “Why do you even smoke those things?”

He shrugged. “Am I supposed to take a message back or not?”

Temari’s hands seemed glued to her hips. As did the scowl on her face. Her eyes, on the other hand, didn’t seem to be able to stay put. “No. Everything’s been arranged.” She looked over her shoulder. “Your services won’t be needed anymore.”

He raised a brow, “what are you-” he paused, looking towards the rising sun.

Something was coming. Something powerful. Temari took a step

forward, her fan already in her arms, standing tall, trying to look intimidating.

Shikamaru rolled his eyes before pulling out a kunai, his eyes darting to the ground, smirking at the long shadows.

And suddenly…it stopped.

A cloud of dust rose past a few buildings, heading towards them. Shikamaru squinted and gasped, his cigarette coming out of his mouth. “Hold it, Temari.” *What the hell was he doing here?*

Uchiha Sasuke stalked down the street towards them, his eyes red and a deep scowl set in his forehead.

Temari took another step forward. Shikamaru swore she *growled* . He grabbed her arm. “You alright?”

She didn’t say anything, but her knuckles were white against her fan.

“Have you seen Sakura, Nara?” Sasuke’s voice was cold and sharp, his Sharingan spinning fast.

“Sakura?” Shikamaru asked as he looked around before looking back at Sasuke. “We’re in Suna…”

“Have you seen her?” He commanded again. “She’s gone.”

Shikamaru rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at Temari. “She’s *been* gone. On that mission, remember?” Temari was always high strung, but this was a bit much.

What a pain.

Shikamaru saw Yamato and Sai running down the street towards them. “She came back and now she’s gone!” He clenched his fist. “And if she thinks she can run from *me* -”

Shikamaru held out his arm, not like it would have stopped Temari from pounding Sasuke into the ground-or trying.

“She’s not here.” Temari growled. “And you shouldn’t be either.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure I would have been the first to know if a world class medic was in my village.” Shikamaru turned to see Gaara in his battle armor

standing at the entrance to the tower. He didn't have his gourd, but he didn't need it here.

The sand as his feet trembled.

Shikamaru winced.

"Feel free to search the village." The sand swirled around Gaara. Sasuke gasped and Shikamaru turned to see the sand floated around him ominously. "But you will *not* disturb my villagers."

The threat was heavier than the sand around them.

Sasuke jutted his chin out, turning to Sai and Yamato. "Let's hurry up."

III

Shikamaru ended up leaving with Sasuke and Team Kakashi. Or what was left of it.

Surprisingly, they didn't find Sakura, even though Sasuke had scoured the village with a fine tooth comb.

It made his job as liaison difficult.

Saying goodbye to Temari was always awkward, but today, with Sasuke breathing down his neck, it was nerve wracking.

"Here." She handed him a pack of cigarettes. "For the trip back."

He could almost kiss her. Almost. "Thanks." He took the box gratefully. He took a step back and stared at her. "Uh, I'll see you around then." She nodded, her eyes flickering from him to Sasuke.

There was another awkward silence. "Alright then, we're off." Shikamaru almost shoved the rest of the party toward the gate.

As they entered the desert, none of them spoke. Shikamaru sighed in between cigarettes.

Temari should have given him a carton, not just a pack.

"So…Sakura's gone?" Shikamaru asked tentatively. "What does that mean? Gone?"

Sasuke's shoulders tensed. "She ran. The coward."

Shikamaru almost dropped his cigarette. *I suppose there are worse things he could call her.*

Sai smiled, “Yes, she’s been gone six days.”

“Six days?” Shikamaru paused, calculating. Of course, if Sakura ‘ran’ Suna would be one of the more obvious choices. A little too on the nose honestly with the firmly held alliance between the two countries, but he had been there ten days and Shikamaru would have known if something happened. He had been lounging around the Kazekage’s tower the whole time.

But then Temari’s angered face flashed through his mind. He shrugged. “I’m sure she’ll come back.”

Sasuke scoffed.

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. *Maybe it’s for the best that she's gone.* Shikamaru inhaled his cigarette deeply. *If she back tracked, it would take her more than three days to get to Suna…* His mind reeled. *When did this troublesome mission of mine start? Six? Seven months ago?* He scratched his head, eyes watching Sasuke as he stalked through the desert.

Everything suddenly clicked.

An image of Sakura and Kakashi flashed in his mind. Shikamaru held back a groan.

“Women are so troublesome.” *Good luck with that, Sakura* .

Sasuke huffed in agreement.

III

Sakura squinted against the setting sun. Somehow, *somehow* , she and three day old son made it to Wind. A lone figure stood at the edge of the sand as the trees cleared.

Tears burned Sakura’s eyes as she saw a familiar, worried face.

Temari-san .

Sakura almost collapsed into the girl's arms. Temari immediately took her the precious bundle and ushered Sakura south-west. “We have two hours until we reach Suna. Sasuke just left a few hours ago, but I’m sure he will be back.” Temari smiled sadly, “Welcome to Suna,

Sakura-san.”

Sakura gripped Temari’s arm gratefully as she was dragged through the desert. Towards her new home.

III

Boss had a rough life.

Pakkun had been with him from the beginning; he had been just a pup himself when he consoled the boy when his father died. Was there to sit with him diligently after Obito, Rin, and Sensei all left.

And now I’m here for this. Pakkun growled, careful not to let his claws dig into Bull’s head. *Poor Boss* .

Pakkun and the pack sat at the Valley of the End, bodies alert and ready, waiting for Boss to catch up.

It wouldn’t be long-Kakashi was desperate.

Pakkun tried to stay out of his masters’ business; out of the politics of humans. But, he liked Sakura. She was always nice to him and the boys.

And he might have been just a dog, but Pakkun knew what was going on.

Better so than most of those humans.

Bull growled at him. He snapped back as Boss almost barreled into them.

“Is she here!?” his voice was strained as his nose was in the air, sniffing. Pakkun pressed himself into Bull as Boss headed towards the cliffs. They followed him towards a small cave. Her scent was present, but very faint.

Pakkun frowned. There were *two* scents, similar but different. New. He glanced at the boys and gruffed.

Keep this between us mutts.

“Trail ends here, Boss.” Bull growled again, but he ignored it. Bull was a dog, but he couldn’t put two and two together if he had four bones.

Kakashi sniffed the air, but the trail was lost- *almost* . “She crossed the

valley.” Pakkun didn’t look up at Kakashi. He couldn’t stand the red, puffy eye.

“But after that-”

“If *I* can smell it, so can you.” His boss said dangerously.

Pakkun took a deep breath. Pakkun had to stop him. Pakkun might have been a dog, but he wasn’t stupid.

He had to protect her pup.

His summoner was already out of the cave when he called loudly. “You were the one that told her to leave.”

Boss froze.

If the girl went back to Konoha, they’d certainly kill her and the pup. And that pup was a part of *their* pack. Pakkun *had* to protect him. “You told her to leave.” Boss didn’t turn around, his head bent.

“Are you saying this is my-”

“I’m saying she took your advice!” Pakkun wasn’t afraid of his leader. But he wasn’t stupid. He stayed close to Bull. “If she stayed in Konoha, you couldn’t always protect her.”

You couldn’t protect your pup.

Bull growled again, but Pakkun only shook his head. “She’s safer elsewhere, Boss.” Pakkun said wearily.

Pakkun swallowed thickly before bounding off to be with his master.

Boss’ jaw was clenched as his eye was set straight ahead. Pakkun looked back to Bull and the other boys. Bull looked unhappier than usual, but he jerked his head slightly.

Pakkun nodded.

“This way, Boss.” It hurt him to lie. They led him east instead of west, but he knew that it was for the best. And Kakashi would know it too. Eventually…

He heard a howl and closed his eyes.

It wasn’t any of his boys.

Adjustments

All the houses in Suna had the same bland, brownish color. They almost blended in with the surrounding sand if not for the large red doors.

Their new home was a small house in the middle of the residential area of Suna. Sakura held Obito as Temari escorted her through the front door. Sakura couldn't help but be appalled by the hideous looking cactus thing in the front yard. It was almost as tall as the house and twisted and contorted, leaning over the house ominously. She sighed. Getting used to Suna foliage was going to be difficult.

"It's cozy," Temari said as she opened the door. It seemed air tight, Sakura noted. Or sand tight …

"It's wonderful Temari." She said softly. The floorboards in the long entranceway were a dark wood, with a contrast to the baby blue walls. The ceilings were taller than she expected, making the house seem more open.

"This is the kitchen." Temari pointed to the left. As Sakura paused at the entrance to the simple kitchen with its white walls and white tiled floor. A small white refrigerator was tucked in the corner with a stove next to it, and the rest of the wall was lined with cabinets. A small wooden table sat in the middle of the room, leaving plenty of space to walk (or for the coming years, running) around.

"The living room is next." The floors were the same dark wood as the hall and the walls were seafoam green. There was a sliding glass door that led to a small backyard.

"Bathroom and bedrooms are in the back." Sakura watched Temari turn lights in a small bathroom with a free standing sink, shower and toilet with a small closet in the back. "Unlike Konoha, we have water restrictions, but as long as you aren't wasteful then you should be okay."

Sakura smiled, looking down at the small bundle in her arms. "I'll be more worried when he's older, little boys love getting dirty."

Temari snorted, "I know, Kankuro was always covered in god knows what. Especially after he started making his own puppets." The blond Shinobi smirked, "There is a hose around back, just spray him with

that.” Sakura looked down, brows furrowed. She couldn’t imagine spraying something so small with the hose. She felt an arm on her shoulder, “He’ll grow up faster than you know.”

Sakura sighed, “I hope not.”

Temari continued on her tour. “Down here are the bedrooms. At the very end is the smaller room, and in here.” Temari opened the door to a large, blue room. “This is your room.”

The room had a queen size bed with plain black silk sheets. There was a dresser with a large mirror next to it that reflected Sakura and Obito back at her. She could barely see his tuft of silver hair sticking out of the bundle. There was a bassinet with blue blankets and a few stuffed animals; a blue dog and a green monkey. “It’s not a lot…” Temari said. Sakura steadily walked over to the crib, gently placing her baby inside. “But it should be enough.

Sakura couldn’t breathe. Her throat tightened as tears welled in her eyes. She looked down at the bassinet. “I-I don't know how to thank you.”

“Sakura-san, you’ve saved Suna multiple times. We are here for you.

“You are one of us for as long as Suna is your home.” Before Sakura could stop herself, she crossed the room, pulling Temari in a tight hug.

“Thank you, Temari-san.”

Temari returned the hug. “Everything will be okay now. You’re safe. We will protect you.” Temari gripped her a little tighter than she thought she meant to. She took a shaky breath, trying to calm her shaking body. A small cry came from the crib. Sakura let the sound fill the room. It was the first time it was safe for Obito to cry.

Sakura felt tears in her own eyes.

“Welcome home, Sakura-san.”

III

Sakura got a letter from Tsunade two weeks later.

After an investigation, it was confirmed that Haruno Sakura had been in Konoha for an undetermined amount of time and left without alerting officials, family or friends. The village is now on lock down.

No one is to leave the Fire Country unless authorized by the Elders of Konoha.

Due to the delicate nature of Haruno's position within Konoha, extensive search parties have been dispatched led by Inuzuka Kiba, Hatake Kakashi, Uchiha Sasuke, and even the Hokage, Uzumaki Naruto. With consent, villages within and surrounding the Fire Country will be checked within the next six months.

More details to come.

Tsunade

Fifth Hokage

"Gaara has already told Konoha that as long as Uchiha Sasuke doesn't conduct the searches they are free to search." Temari had brought the letter. She spoke in hushed words as to not wake Obito.

Sakura nodded, readjusting the baby on her arms. They were adjusting well.

"I would stay close to home for the next few weeks." Temari watched Obito. "Once you're ready, you can start work at the hospital."

Sakura nodded. It was part of the deal Tsunade had bargained. Sakura get asylum as long as she works for Suna in the shadows.

An easy trade.

Temari pulled out a second, thicker envelope. "This is also from Tsunade-sama." Sakura adjusted Obito in her arms, grabbing the envelope.

She paused, knowing what it was before she opened it.

"What-?"

"Rent for the first six months has been paid. This," Temari gestured, "is what's left.

"And a little…extra. She said as time passes and she sells your items from Konoha she'll send more.

"But this should get you through until you're ready to work."

Sakura's fingers trembled as she picked up the envelope. Her stomach

dropped as she opened it to see the bills.

And how big they were.

Sakura opened her mouth but paused when she saw a slip of paper.

The paper was in a familiar scrawl, the note coded, but Sakura was easily able to decipher Kakashi's quick hand.

Keep her safe.

III

A sandstorm raged through the village for weeks after she arrived. Her neighbor, Nekoru-san assured her this was normal, and she'd quickly get used to it. Sakura, like most of the villagers in Suna, stayed inside. The visitors of Suna, on the other hand, took the opportunity to search houses. Looking out the windows near the front of the house, Sakura watched as Konoha Shinobi, her former comrades, went door to door, looking for her.

But they never stopped at hers.

III

Sakura started working at the small hospital in the poisons unit five months into living in Suna. There were many people that didn't like her-seeing her as some hot shot medic from Konoha who was trying to come in and trying to tell them what's what.

But it didn't take long for them to see how valuable her knowledge was, no matter where she came from. Soon the fake smiles became real ones and life seemed to lull into a peaceful one as she quietly celebrated Obito being a six month smiling baby boy.

It was quiet, she was lonely, but she was grateful.

She felt, finally , everything would be ok.

III

At Eight months, Tsunade wrote another letter.

It only had two words.

Watch out.

One day, she was leaving the hospital, her cloak pulled tight around her and her hood pulled around her face to keep the sand out when he stalked passed her into the hospital.

What is he doing here?! Fear gripped her as she pulled the hood tightly over her face, picking up the pace. She was almost home when a hand came to rest on her back.

“ We haven’t spoken in a while. ” A voice whispered in her ear. “ It’s time we catch up. ”

III

The Kazekage sat awkwardly on her black couch, holding Obito in a standing position at almost arms length. They stared at each other, almost entranced.

Obito’s feet seemed to grip the Kazekage’s robes as his knees, as he squirmed, ready to bounce. Sakura pressed her lips together as Gaara looked confused at the boy as he tried to voice up and down.

Sakura, standing in the door way, couldn't help but marvel at her little boy; Obito’s had almost doubled in size and weight. His silver hair had grown out and up. His green eyes were bright against his pale skin. A gummy smile erupted from his face, making the Kazekage’s jump.

“It means he likes you.” Sakura said, entering the room. She held out a small cup. “Trade you.”

Gaara looked grateful. “You still need a coffee table.” Sakura looked around her living room. There was the black couch and two matching chairs. An empty book case sat against the wall and a big blanket with toys took up most of the floor. A long shelf lined one of the far walls that held three pictures. One of Team Kakashi, one of her and Naruto outside the Ramen stand, and one of her and Kakashi at a bar. She smiled sadly at that picture. Pulling the baby closer to her.

“I saw him today.”

“And hopefully it will be the last time.” Gaara said. Sakura looked back to him as he took a long sip of tea. “I told him he could look for whoever it was that he was looking for one more time, but he won’t be allowed back in this village unless the Hokage was with him.”

She bowed deeply, “Thank you, Kazekage-sama.”

Gaara's smile slipped as he reached into his cloak and pulled out a letter. "I'm not use to showing confidential letters between two village leaders..." The Kazekage held the letter out to her. "Trade once more." He eyed Obito skeptically, but took him without complaint.

Gaara!

It is me! The Sixth Hokage! (Naruto!)

Sakura rolled her eyes. "So official…"

As I'm sure you've heard, my teammate, and close friend, Sakura-chan has disappeared. I won't say I'm not…happy…that she is gone. She was going to have to give up her whole life and her own happiness for Sasuke. She is a strong woman, and I could tell it was already hurting her in more ways than one. She can be free now. Be her own person. I just wish I could have been there for her in the way that I should have been. I could have protected her, now that I'm Hokage. His handwriting became a little shaky. If you see her or hear about her whereabouts, just send word. You don't have to tell me where she is, between you and me, I'd like it better if you didn't, but only that she's safe.

She is deeply missed.

I hope to hear from you soon,

Naruto

SIXTH HOKAGE

Sakura swallowed the lump in her throat as she shakily held the letter out to the Kazekage and took back her baby. She pressed Obito close, sifting her fingers through his soft, fluffy hair. Gaara tucked the letter back into his breast pocket. He took another sip of tea.

They were silent as he finished his tea, placing the cup on the floor. "I will send a confirmation in the next few weeks. Since this has become an international matter, I will tell him I have heard word of your safety, and that I beg for him to keep Uchiha on a leash since he is no doubt harassing the other countries as much as mine." Sakura nodded, rocking back and forth, a small gurgling sound coming from Obito. She swallowed thickly."Can he walk?"

Sakura smiled. "Yeah, he has been for a few weeks. It's very early for him," she placed him on the ground. Obito looked around before

struggling to his hands and knees before pulling himself up onto two chubby legs. After a few wobbles his green eyes glared fiercely at Gaara as he started making his way towards the Kazekage. After a few shaky steps he swayed dangerously and fell with a thump on the ground. He looked back to Sakura and grinned, laughing, clapping his hands together. He pulled himself up onto his hands and knees and crawled the rest of the way.

She saw the fear in Gaara's eyes as Obito crawled to him, grabbing his robes and climbing his way up Gaara's knees. As he stood on somewhat shaky legs he laughed in triumph before looking back to Sakura. He let out a squealing laugh.

His eyes got wide as he let go, slowly falling. Gaara tried to reach for him, but he fell solidly on his butt before Gaara could save him.

Obito let out another squeal of delight before climbing back up the Kazekage's legs. Gaara looked like he'd been stabbed.

Sakura smiled. "Here, I'll show you how to hold him. You'll need to learn one day. And he's a pretty sturdy test subject."

Gaara looked at her like he had three heads. She nodded, "You'll. Need. To. Know." She scooped her baby up and sat on the couch next to Gaara. "A leader must be strong and not be afraid of anything." Sakura placed the baby in his arms. "And that means an eight month old, who's only weapon is his spit up."

"He will be a strong boy." Gaara said with a slightly shaky voice. "Will he become a ninja?"

Sakura looked at the fascinated look on Gaara's face as he cradled her boy. She laughed, "I don't know. I doubt, knowing his father, I'd be able to keep him from being one." Gaara didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"He would be a good ninja." He said finally. "And I will teach him." He said affirmatively.

Sakura shook her head, "Well, wait until he can walk across the living room at least, okay?"

Gaara nodded.

III

A screaming eighteen-month old boy ran through the hallway, holding a plastic kunai as a loud knock came from the front door. Obito froze, glaring at the offending door. Sakura looked through the entrance to the kitchen at the door and then at Obito.

No one had ever knocked on their door before. They didn't have many visitors, but the ones that did visit never knocked. The Kazekage can do what he wants and Temari simply barges in. And her Nekoru-san, who kindly offered to watch Obito while she worked, always peaked in the front door, calling out before she came in.

Sakura looked down at Obito in a blue shirt and shorts combo with white socks, looking at her for guidance as to what to do in this unheard of situation.

Sakura's mind flashed to Kakashi before quickly dashing to Sasuke. Another knock filled the room. Obito jumped with a gasp. She tightened her grip on the wooden spoon as she walked towards the door. When she heard padding feet, she looked behind her, almost snorting as her son mimicked her actions, holding a chubby finger to his lips, shhing her loudly. Another loud bang rattled the house.

"Open the damn door!"

Sakura and Obito jumped. Sakura dropped the spoon as she lunged for the door.

It had gotten dark since she'd gotten home, but she could make out the silhouette. Her heart lodged in her throat.

"Shishou?" Sakura opened the door wider, not bothering to hide her shock.

"You just going to stand there or are you going to let me get out of this god forsaken sand?"

Sakura moved, but before Tsunade could move, a tiny battle cry rang out from behind Sakura. Sakura quickly jammed her foot out just in time for Obito to run chest first into Sakura's leg, huffing loudly before grabbing onto her leg for balance, dropping his toy and the wooden spoon in the process. Tsunade looked bewildered between the two of them. Sakura sighed, nudging him back with her foot. "She's not an enemy."

"Menniemy!" he cried, trying to move his mothers leg. She frowned, pushing a little more forcefully, knocking him on his butt, swooping

down to pick him, his toy, and the spoon, all in one swoop. Sakura turned to see Tsuande staring incredulously at her. Sakura smiled, “Please, come in.”

She backed out of the way to let her teacher in. Before closing the door, she looked around to see if she was followed. She went to close the door, but stopped when Obito held out his hand, looking around too before squirming to get down.

“Shizune will be a long in a day or two. She had some…” Tsunade coughed, “Unfinished business in Konoha.” She rolled her eyes, throwing off her cloak. She tossed it on the coat rack and began inspecting the hallway.

As they entered the kitchen, Tsunade turned, grinning. “Well! Let me see him!” Sakura put a wriggling boy in Tsunade’s arms, who wriggled like a wet cat. Tsunade huffed, plopping him on the table. Sakura went back to the stove, watching Tsunade with bemused eyes. She was frowning at Obito, who mimicked her. “Do you know who I am, boy?” Tsunade said authoritatively. Obito shook his head, causing Sakura to poke his arm lightly with her spoon.

“Yes you do, Obi-chan, who is she?” The boy looked from his arm, to his mother, back to Tsunade.

“No.” he said quietly, not looking at either of them.

“He’s quite the shy one.” Tsunade noted, her brown eyes looked to Sakura, “And you shouldn’t beat him with a wooden spoon.”

Sakura sighed.

Obito’s eyes lit up as he turned to stare at Tsunade, eyes wide with excitement. “She beats me everyday with that terrible thing! It’s like whips and chins!”

“Chains, Obito.” Sakura put her hands on her hips, the spoon twirling in her fingers. “Whips and chains .”

He looked to his mother and nodded furiously, before turning back to Tsunade. “She beats me!” he whispered. Sakura rolled her eyes before turning back to her soup. It was almost done.

Tsunade laughed, “He’s like his father.”

“Well, he didn’t get that from me.” Sakura snorted, turning off the

stove.

“You-you know my papa?” Obito’s voice was timid, but held more force than before. Sakura pressed her lips together.

Tsunade nodded. “Yes, yes I do.” she said cautiously.

“When is he coming to see me?” Obito asked earnestly. “Mama says later but-”

“Obito, go wash up for dinner.” Sakura’s voice was more strained than she meant. She forced a smile as the boy looked at her. He opened his mouth but she gave him a stern look, and he conceded. He held out his arms to Tsunade, who helped him off the table. He wasted no time running towards the bathroom.

Sakura sighed loudly, pulling three bowls out of the cabinets. “He won’t leave you alone now.” She said lightly, a ghost smile on her lips. “He’ll have all sorts of questions-”

“Does he know?” Tsunade’s even voice made Sakura pause.

“…he knows enough for now. I won’t hide anything from him.” Tsunade didn’t respond and Sakura finished preparing for dinner.

“I tell him stories of Kakashi. The good ones.” She said, putting two of the bowls down, one in front of her teacher and one opposite of her. She turned and grabbed a much smaller bowl and a small spoon and put it between them. “He knows almost as much as I do about him-”

“And about what happened in-”

“He’s not even two. I know he seems older than he is,” she said as Obito walked back in the room. “He’s much farther ahead of where he should be by this age.” She said lightly but loudly. “His vocabulary is much higher than someone his age should be.”

She ruffled his hair as his ears pinkened.

“I don’t know if your Mama told you.” Tsunade reached for the boy and put him in his booster seat. “But your Papa was the same way, smarter than everyone.”

Obito perked up at this. “Really?”

“Your dad is a genius. Top of his class at the academy!” Tsunade went into some story Sakura had never heard about Kakashi chasing a duck,

and the elusive White Fang chasing the small boy and the duck through the village. Obito's entire attention was devoted to Tusnade and not his food. He giggled at the end, almost knocking his soup off the tray. Sakura was somehow able to get him fed and with another story of Kakashi's youth and the promise of one more for bedtime.

Sakura laid on the couch as Tsunade sat with the boy in his room. She felt old seeing her youthful looking teacher. Sakura's hair had grown and was almost brushing her shoulders. She was still lean as she was in her active ninja days, but she had lost a lot of her definition now that she was chasing a small boy around the house instead of rogue ninjas across the five countries.

Not to mention how tired she was all the time…

"He's down for the night." Tsunade collapsed next to Sakura on the couch. "Sorry if I got him started on something. With Kakashi."

Sakura waved it off. "You're fine, Shishou. He asks about him all the time. He's seen the few pictures I have…"

"Ah!" Tsunade sat up slightly, pulling a scroll from her sleeves and handing it over to Sakura. "It's a summoning scroll. Your pictures and a few other keepsakes are in there. Shizune promised to bring some more things Ino was able to salvage before Sasuke burned it all."

Sakura paled. "Burned?"

Tsunade smiled sadly, eyes unfocusing at the ceiling. "It's been…a rough year and a half in Konoha.

"Sasuke, naturally, started seeing red. He demanded the council charge me with something because he knew I was somehow involved." Tsunade smirked, "The council, I believe, saw what they did was unacceptable, due to Naruto of all people, taking charge and telling them off in a very non-Naruto way. Of course not before punching Sasuke in the face for the way he treated you." Sakura couldn't help the smile that came to her lips. Tsunade sighed again, "Well, as you know they both ran out, searching the world for you. Gaara had already set up this house," she made a grand motion with her hands, "it has a cloaking seal on it. You can't see it unless you know it's here." Sakura nodded, already assuming something was different about this house.

"Gaara allowed Konoha to search the village for a while, but then told Uchiha if he ever stepped in the village without the Hokage he would

be killed on sight." Sakura gaped. Gaara had left that threat out. Tsunade laughed, "He was harassing the villagers. I'm sure you had felt some of the animosity."

Sakura closed her eyes, nodding slowly. "It's gotten better. After I started saving lives that no one else could save, I started gaining some respect. Obito on the other hand…"

Tsunade nodded, "Itachi had difficulties fitting in as well. Let's just hope that works out better."

Sakura sighed. The last thing she wanted was for Obito to end up like any Uchiha.

"After Gaara's declaration, Naruto did what any logical person would do and confined the Uchiha to the village for…two? Three years? Something like that. And after that if he leaves, he can't leave unless he has his ANBU with him."

"Sai?"

Tsunade smirked, "Sai finds Sasuke's hatred very amusing."

Sakura's heart dropped, "And Kakashi?" she asked quietly.

Tsunade leaned her head back again, her eyes slightly glossy. "I don't know." She said softly. "He hides his emotions so well that it's hard to see that he's hurting. But it shows in its own way. He spends more time at the memorial stone when he's not out on missions. No solos though. Another one of Naruto's decrees." Tsunade blinked a few times before sitting up and staring at Sakura, "He asks about you. Ask where you are. If you're safe." Tsunade was quiet for a few moments. She placed a hand on her chest, "I-I have money from him." She clenched her jaw, "I was going to use some of it to get the kid something.

"He told me he was glad you were gone. You were better off wherever you are." She looked away. "His only regret was that he couldn't be there with you. To protect you." She patted her chest, "He wants to help you however he can.

"I didn't turn it down because I know that Gaara's paying you well, but…doing all this on your own isn't easy."

Sakura nodded, tears rolling down her face as she brought her knees to her chest. A large lump formed in her stomach.

“And,” Tsunade looked at Sakura seriously, “that he never told you he loved you.” Sakura’s breath caught in her throat. She gripped her knees tighter, squeezing her eyes shut trying to remember how to breathe. She should have told him. If she would have just told him -

She felt strong arms envelop her as the dam broke loose and she sobbed into her teacher’s chest. Her mind flashed to what could have been, her, Obito and Kakashi living in this small house. Obito not asking questions about his father that he should already know- his favorite food, color toothpaste flavor…She wouldn’t have to sleep in her bed alone every night. He would have been here with them…

“I know it might seem hard to believe Sakura,” Tsunade said firmly, “but you made the right choice by not telling him.” Sakura pulled away from her teacher, eyes brimming with tears,

“I don’t-”

“Sakura, Kakashi would have followed you to the moon. But, it’s more complicated than that.

“Not only is Kakashi a Shinobi of the Leaf, but he’s one of the best Shinobi there has ever been. Kakashi leaving without explanation would have led to an international incident. Especially if we couldn’t state where he was going. The best case would be he would be a missing nin.

“And the one thing Kakashi is good at…” Tsunade winced, “It would be hard if he suddenly became a Sunan Shinobi. And it would be harder to hide that you were here. Which would cause an even bigger incident.” Tsunade pulled her in, “Sasuke would want an all out war over you in the middle of Suna, and I don’t think that would work out well for anyone.

“Because we both know Sasuke says he’s changed his ways, but I believe those loyalties are as thick as he claims.”

Sakura took heavy, shaky breaths, nodding. “Go to bed Sakura. We will catch up more in the morning.” Tsunade pried herself from Sakura and pulled Sakura to stand. Sakura felt numb as her body moved with Tsunade to the door, but her mind was still on Kakashi. Tsunade threw her cloak over her shoulders, looking back at Sakura as she opened the door. “He looks just like him. Except for the eyes.”

“And my nose. A little.” Sakura smiled weakly, numbly. Tsunade pulled her into a hug, “I will see you tomorrow Sakura.” She

whispered as she stepped out into the cold desert night, closing the door with a small click. A moment passed before Sakura felt her body fall against the wall, sliding down to the floor. Before Sakura could cry again, a small hand tugged on her sleeve.

“I can’t sleep Mama, can I sleep with you?” Obito’s eyes were red and he gave a big yawn. Sakura smiled, tousling his silver hair.

“Of course.” The boy pulled on her as she rose to her feet, pulling her to the bedroom, and into the bed. Pulling back the sheets, he waited for her to fall into bed with him, snuggling up close to her, holding her tightly.

“I love you, Mama.”

She held him just as tightly, “I love you, Obito.” She whispered as she covered them both up.

She lay awake, wondering what Kakashi was doing, eyes growing heavy before she fell into a deep sleep.

Twos and Fours

Sakura smiled widely as she watched small fingers grip the counter top. The mess of silver hair with slivers of pink highlights peaked over the top of the counter as a whine filled the kitchen as feet pattered on the floor.

Sakura hummed, “Be patient.”

“No,” Obito huffed, jumping. Green eyes sparkled with every jump. Sakura was glad Nekoru-san advised her to keep chairs on the counters if she doesn’t want Obito climbing on tables.

Because the boy could *climb* .

After three jumps, she almost could see his whole face and decided to call it quits. She scooped him up. He let out a mix of a strangled and battle cry. “But it’s *mine* !” She carried him out of the room, his head turned and his eyes glued to the table.

“Not for a few hours.”

As they rounded the hallway, heading towards the entrance hall, he wiggled, but she kept her hold. “But it’s my cake!”

She smiled and plopped him on the floor near his shoes. “Come on, it’s time to get your present!”

He watched her skeptically. “It’s not really a present…” he said, shoving his shoes on. “A bed isn’t a present. It’s a *nesseraly* .” He emphasized.

“A nesseraly?” she raised her brow as her two year old stood and fished out a bucket hat from the box next to his shoes. He nodded seriously.

“I think a real kunai is a more suptible present.”

“I think it is a more suptible present for someone twice your size.” He pouted. She sighed, “How old do you think you are, Obito. I forget?”

He pursed his lips. Sakura couldn’t help but smile at him; he looked adorable. She grabbed his cloak, handing it to him before pulling hers on, slipping into her shoes. “How about a nice picture book?”

He scoffed, “I can *already* read.”

“Oh really!?” She gasped in amazement, “So how’s that book you bought last time working out?” It was a book about different types of rocks that would make her eyes cross.

He was reaching for the door handle, on tip toes when he paused. He looked back at her, scowling. He turned back and opened the door. “Fine.”

She ruffled his hair. As she stepped out of the house, she watched as her toddler closed the door and scampered to her side, holding his hand out. Her heart melted and she grabbed his hand and his fingers curled around her pinkie. The sand blew around them as they made their way towards the commercial district.

“I don’t get why we need to buy beds anyways. The one we have is big enough.” He grumbled.

“You know, most little boys sleep in their own bed.” He looked up at her skeptically.

“Most kids my age still sleep in a crib. And drool on themselves.”

She squeezed his hand. “You exaggerate! Most of Nekoru-san’s kids are younger than you!”

He frowned, “yeah, and the older ones don’t want anything to do with me.” He mumbled. “Cause I’m a baby.”

She squeezed his hand. “It’ll get better, once you get into school.”

He nodded. They walked in silence the rest of the way to the furniture store. The store wasn’t very big, but they had a simple twin size bed that was really meant for a kid much older than Obito.

But like he said, her bed was big enough for the both of them.

“How do you like it?”

Obito circled it a few times, inspecting the small bed post that had smooth wood bulbs on each corner. He climbed on the bed and bounced a few times before inspecting the mattress threads. He put his fingers to his chin thoughtfully before he spoke again.

“It’s too big.”

She pursued her lips. “It’s supposed to be. You’ll grow into it.” She beckoned him with her hand. “Come look at the sheets I picked out.

He sighed and hopped off the bed. Her smile widened as he made his way to the counter. She opened the box and picked him up, setting him on the table. “Special ordered.” His eyes widened as he looked down at the navy blue comforter with silver shurikens on it. A smile broke out on his face as he hugged his mom.

“Perfect!”

III

When they made it home, Sakura wasn’t surprised the door was open.

Obito gasped excitedly, “Baa-chan!” Obito dropped his bags and ran towards the door.

Sakura scowled. She scooped up the dropped bags and headed inside, Obito’s excited voice echoing through the house.

“The bed sucks but the covers are awesome! And I got a book with lots of dogs!” Sakura rolled her eyes. She dropped the bags off in the living room, and headed into the kitchen. “But Mama said I can’t have any dogs because we are both too busy to take care of one!”

Her jaw dropped as she entered the kitchen.

“What the hell, Shishou!”

Her teacher, son and the *Kazekage* sat around her table and were helping themselves to the *cake* .

“It’s really good, Sakura-san,” the Kazekage mused. The former Hokage mumbled an agreement.

Obito looked smug, sticking a large piece of chocolate cake in his mouth.

III

Sakura was tucking her son into bed-her bed- with his new shuriken covers and new book.

“Thanks for everything, Mama.” He yawned.

She smiled, ruffling his hair. “Happy Birthday, Obi-chan.”

He looked down at his book, gripping it tightly before looking back up. “Do you think Papa can be here next year?”

Her heart stopped, a lump forming in her throat. His eyes widened. “It’s okay!” he smiled, “I was just asking!”

“Obito…” she whispered.

“It’s fine Mama,” he said seriously. “It’s fine.” He turned over on his side, clutching his new book.

She kissed him on his temple before leaving the room.

She padded to the living room where Tsunade and the Kazekage were sitting silently.

“Kids grow up fast.” Tsunade smiled sadly.

“He’s trying to grow up faster than he should.” Sakura leaned on the door frame. Her mind flashed back to him holding his hand out for her. “But he still is just a baby.”

Gaara nodded. “In some aspects…” Sakura raised a brow to the man. He sat straight. “I think it’s almost time for him to start going to school.”

“But, he’s only two-”

“He’s already more advanced than children three years older than him.” Gaara spoke with authority. “I’m not saying the academy. Just-school.”

Tsunade looked skeptically at Sakura. “I’ll be honest- I told him Obito should start the academy.” Sakura felt anger build. Tusnade threw her hands up. “He needs to be with kids mentally on his level.”

Sakura sighed, thinking back to the boy’s frown earlier today. “I agree, but he’s still too small. I can teach him from home and then, when he’s older, he can go to school-be with kids his own age.”

“You know,” Tsunade said cautiously. “We did that to Kakashi. The Third didn’t want him to go into the academy until he was older, but under the circumstances we had no other choice. I think it was for the best. He was able to be with minds that were capable of talking to him.”

Sakura closed her eyes, sighing. “He’s going to be an outsider no

matter what." Her mind went to Sasuke, to how Kakashi reacted to those his own age.

Distant.

"That's why I said just school." Gaara said. "I want him in school. So he can socialize with others his own age. So he doesn't feel isolated for being so…special."

Sakura looked at Gaara. If anyone knew what it was like to be alone, the Kazekage knew.

Sakura sighed. "I'll think about it. But I think I want to wait a few more years for the academy."

III

When Obito woke up in the morning, she talked to him about it. She thought his eyes would widen and he would automatically vote for the academy. But he sat back in his booster seat and put his hands to his chin and closed his eyes, thoughtfully. She couldn't help but get watery eyed. Despite never meeting his father, he had his mannerisms.

"Does it mean I get away from the crazy cat lady?"

Sakura rolled her eyes, but nodded.

He nodded, "I'll go to school. Pretend I'm not as smart so it's not so-"

"Obito." She grasped his small hands in hers. "Don't ever do that." She shook them gently. "Do not ever pretend to be someone you're not."

He frowned. "I don't know-"

"Don't be ashamed-"

"I'm not!" he looked away, "I just don't want friends…"

She pulled him close. "I'm so sorry this is hard for you."

He pushed against her, "You can't help that you and Papa were super smart!" he said cheerily, smiling brightly. "I'll be myself, I promise!"

She hugged him tightly.

III

Two years later

"Obito! It's time for bed!"

Sakura sensed the small ball of energy storming from the other room. She heard his loud footfalls before seeing his short, cropped hair, his green eyes a light with excitement. "Story?"

She nodded. Obito threw his hands in the air in triumph and marched to his room. "Do I need to guess what you want to hear?"

Obito jumped into bed, grinning, "The Copy-Ninja Kakashi!"

She smiled, sitting down next to him in the bed. She put her finger up to her chin, smiling, "Which one to tell…"

"Tell me a new one, Mama!" His voice was full of excitement, but slightly groggy. She would never understand how the boy was so full of energy until he was covered up in bed.

"Have you heard the story of Zabuza?" Obito rolled his eyes. "How about Kakashi vs. The Ninja of the Mist?" she tried to make it sound mystical.

"Mama!" Obito pouted.

Sakura smiled, ruffling his hair. "I'll tell you about the time we saved the Kazekage." His face lit up. She raked her mind for the more…child friendly version when a small voice came from under the covers.

"Do you think…do you think I'll ever get to meet him?" Sakura looked down to see his green eyes looking down at the blue covers of their bed, slowly growing fingers poking at a shuriken.

Sakura sighed. "Yes, you will. But…It will be a while…"

"Does he…does he know about me?" His eyes were glossy and sad. She sunk down further into the bed, gathering him in her arms. He was shaking.

She was hoping this day would come when he was older. "Obito,

"Tonight, I will tell you the story about your father and me. And why we live here and he lives in Konoha. And why he doesn't know where either of us are." She heard him sniffle and she lifted his chin. She caught his eye "Because if he knew where we were. *Especially you* ," she smiled, "he would stop at nothing to be here." Obito stared for a

moment before nodding slowly.

She stared at him seriously, “you might not understand all of this now, but I will be honest with you. You aren’t a baby anymore. You’re starting the academy soon.” He nodded, taking a deep breath. “It all started when I was working in the hospital in Konoha, your father and I had already been seeing each other for years at this point, when a nurse ran down the hall to say that Uchiha Sasuke had been brought back by Naruto…”

III

“Haruno!” Obito skidded to a halt, heaving, as he looked for a place small enough to hide him. It wasn’t hard, since he was half the size of everyone else. He heard footfalls echoing in the corridor. He shook his head and made a mad dash down the hall and to the right, hiding behind a door frame.

He *really* hated the academy.

Not only was it easy, far easier than he imagined, but damn *Dan* kept messing with him. He smirked as Dan ran past him.

“Dumbass.” Obito breathed, back tracking down the hall. He didn’t understand why he had it out for him. Was it because he was smarter than him? It wasn’t that difficult, Dan was dumber than rocks. *Not the worst student in class,* Obito chided himself, remembering what his mother said about the now Hokage. *Just the dumbest* . Obito cheered as he saw the classroom in sight. He was almost home free.

“You little shit!” Obito's feet left the ground, and was spun in the air to face Dan. Dan was eight, with naturally tan skin and brown hair and brown eyes. Obito called him the sandman to his back. Not because he was scary like the sandman, but because he looked like the wet sand.

Maybe Dan found out about his little nickname.

“Let me go!” Obito wriggled out of his grasp, tripping over his feet. He backed into a wall. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw teachers and students peeking out of the classrooms, “I haven’t done anything to you!”

“You exist, you little twerp!” The teachers stood in the hallways, blocking the other students from seeing anything.

You aren't going to do anything!? Obito looked back at Dan, "that's a little uncalled for! It's not my fault I exist!"

"And I bet you it wasn't your *mommy's* fault either!" Dan took a sluggish swing at Obito.

"That didn't even make sense!" He ducked easily out of the way.

"Shut up!" Dan took another swing.

Obito took a deep breath before quickly grabbing hold of the passing wrist and pulled Dan down, swinging his foot into Dan's gut. The older boy doubled over, wheezing. Obito took a few steps back before a large hand grabbed the back of his shirt.

"Detention, Haruno." His teacher said through gritted teeth.

Mama's not going to be happy.

Again.

Obito looked around. It seemed like the whole school was watching. His stomach dropped when he saw Kazekage's brother.

"I *hate* school."

III

Sakura heard the door slam and a knowing dry cough. She left the kitchen as she made her way into the hall. Obito was covered in sand from head to toe, he wiped his face, let out a noise that broke her heart as he rubbed sand in his eyes. "I hate this sand!" the boy seethed. Trying to brush it off, but only moved it around. "It sticks to me more than anything else." She watched as he shook like a dog, getting half the sand out of his hair at least. He frowned, "I hate this shit."

Sakura held her tongue as the boy cursed. "You are home three hours early from the academy,"

He jammed his hands in his pockets and shrugged, making a chill go up her spin. "Those teachers are stupid." He mumbled, kicking his shoes off. "They don't stop fights."

"You got in another fight?" Sakura sighed, walking over and kneeling down in front of him, brushing sand off his arms. "Was it with Dan?"

He nodded.

She frowned. “Come on, let’s cool you down.

III

She watched as Obito rubbed his hands on his face as she sprayed him with the hose.

“I don’t know what his problem is?” Obito said, dejected. “I’ve never done anything to him…and he still picks on me.”

“He knows you’ll be stronger.”

He snorted, “Yeah, unless he stays a foot taller than me…” Obito shook like a dog, wet sand flying.

Sakura put the hose down. “Obito, look at me.” She knelt down and pressed her hands to his wet face. It took a few moments but she finally coasted him into looking at her, green eyes shining. She gave him an encouraging smile. “You want to be a strong ninja?” he nodded, “Well, you’re going to have to deal with guys like Dan…or…” she rolled her head slightly, “or you just beat the ‘shit’ out of them.” Obito shrugged.

“I don’t want to show off that I’m better than them.”

“So modest…” Sakura stood up, “But it’s not showing off, it’s standing your ground.” She ruffled his sandy hair. “Come on, put your shoes back on, I’ll give you some tips.”

Obito stood glaring. “You?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Hey, you’re mom’s got some moves! You’ve heard the stories!”

“Yeah, but you’re just a medic-nin.”

Sakura put her hands on her hips.“I will show *you* who is just a ‘medic-nin.’ Put your shoes on.” Like a switch he was off to fetch his shoes, squirming with excitement. She smiled sadly.

The academy days were going to be a long, long time.

III

Three days later, Sakura couldn’t stop from glancing up at Obito

during dinner. His face was raw and swollen, cut up and was a yellowish green color. Obito sighed, putting his chopsticks down. His hands were also raw and cut up.

“I’m fine mom.” Her heart leapt at the true smile that spread on his face. “You should see the other guy.”

Sakura nodded, stabbing her rice before looking back up to her son. “Are you sure you don’t want me to heal it?”

Obito laughed softly, “Yeah, it’s not that bad. He’s not that strong.” Obito scratched his cheek, wincing slightly.

Sakura’s eyes widened as a small line of blood flowed from Obito’s cheek. “You’re bleeding.” She hissed, jumping up from the table, hands already glowing green.

“Mom! I’m fine!” He quickly picked up his bowl and he went back to eating.

Sakura took a deep breath before stalking back to her seat, kneeling, “I swear Obito, you are just like your father.”

Obito’s eyes were wide. “My father?” His voice was soft, but excited.

Sakura cursed herself. “Yes, your father had a thing about not going to the hospital whenever he was injured, or sick, or bleeding, or anything.” She smiled despite herself, “He always brushed it off, saying ‘it’s fine, Sakura-chan!’” she sat in silence for a moment, lost in her memories. She shook her head before moving back to her son, smacking his hands away, pressing a glowing hand to his face. “And don’t think you can get into that habit, just because I told you that. Your father is a moron.”

She moved her hand, nodding at the cheek. It wasn’t completely healed, but it was good enough for now. “I’ll leave these bruises for now, it’ll be good for you, but once you start coming home covered in blood, bones sticking out or what not, don’t expect me not to do anything about it.” She stood up, brushing herself off. She looked down at the small boy who was still staring off in space, his mouth hanging open in a smile. Sakura sat down in her seat, picking up her chopsticks.

“Listen, Obito, I’m sorry we don’t talk about him a lot. It’s hard, and I know it has to be hard for you but-”

“It’s fine mom.” He smiled, pressing his hand to his cheek. “Think you can show me some more moves after dinner?”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you have any homework?”

He rolled his eyes.

“For an hour. Finish your food first.”

Gaara's Plan

Chapter Notes

Six

Gaara smiled fondly at Obito. They stood on the platform above the Kazekage's tower. His silver hair with strips of pink stood up at odd angles, his skin was a sunkissed tan.Though only a boy, he was starting to look like his father. Except for his piercing green eyes.

"Haruno Obito." Gaara spoke gently, but firmly.

"Kazekage-jii-sama" the young boy bowed, making his hair flop ungracefully over his face.

The Kazekage's smile widened. "Haruno Obito, you are an exceptional young boy. At six years old, you're already ready to graduate from the academy. The youngest in Suna's history. Almost younger than your own father." The boy's face dropped. Gaara sighed deeply, *a father he's never met.* Gaara cleared his throat loudly. "You should be a very proud young man."

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

Gaara placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You are very brilliant, in more ways than one. You are very strong in more ways than one. You've known more hardships than most, you-"

"Not as many as you, Kazekage-sama." He murmured, looking away. "I have my mother. She has supported me and loved me very much. I should be very happy. Content." Gaara watched the boy bite his lip and look down at his shoes. "But…" he noted the boy's voice tightening.

Gaara was careful with his next words. "Your father would be very proud of you."

He slipped out of Gaara's grasp and walked towards the edge of the platform. "It's hard, you know?" He hugged himself, "I can't tell Mom. She blames herself enough as it is," he plopped down, letting his feet hang over the edge. "I know I'm just being a spoiled little kid," he whispered, probably more to himself than to the Kazekage. "I just want to meet him. To know that he at least knows I exist."

Gaara watched Obito for a moment before joining him, watching their feet swing in unison. Obito's face didn't show anything, but his knuckles were white against the railing and his eyes showed a different story. The boy no longer looked like a possible Shinobi; he looked just like a small six year old.

"I'm sure you've heard how everyone hated me once?" he watched as Obito nodded, not looking at him. Gaara sighed, looking out at his village. "I was once a monster." Obito gasped. Gaara looked down to see Obito's eyes as wide as saucers. Gaara looked back out towards his city. "I was born with the one tailed beast. The whole village hated me. They all wanted me dead. My mother…" Gaara paused and looked down at the boy, "my mother was so ashamed of me, she killed herself." Despite his confession he smiled as he watched the boy's mouth slacken before shaking his head.

"No way, no one could ever be ashamed of you Jii-sama…" his heart soared as he felt a small hand grip his.

"I was born to be a monster, and that's what I became. I was hated and feared by everyone; even my brother and sister feared me.

"But all that changed when I met Uzumaki Naruto. You know who he is?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically. "The Hokage!"

"He saved me. He made me realize I wasn't a monster. That *we* are both people. He…" Gaara took a deep breath. "He changed me, making me want to be a better, stronger person. Made me want to protect my village, to become Kazekage.

"Your mother is his dearest friend. Because of that, she saved my brother's life and my life."

They were both silent, watching the city beneath them. "You know…" Obito whispered, hand on Gaara's tightening, "A lot of people at the academy say I'm able to graduate only because you have a 'special interest' in my mother and me…and it's not just my classmates…" the boy took a deep breath, shoulders slacking slightly.

Gaara shook out of Obito's grip to wrap his arm around him, "Yes it is. I would die for your mother, and as long as you call Suna your home, I will protect you both." He nodded solemnly. "So there might be a little 'special interest,' but you both are strong assets to me and to my village." The boy frowned, nodding, "Do you know why your mother

brought you here?"

"She said because she was weak." He murmured, looking down at their dangling feet. "And something about that Uchiha Sasuke guy. She told me she'll tell me more as I get older. I just figured she was scared that my father would reject-"

"No." Gaara said firmly, "Your mother was put in a terrible situation, one that came between her and the man she loved, *your father*." Obito's head perked, "Your father doesn't know about you. And it's for the better." The boy looked at him skeptically. "A man named Uchiha Sasuke, a former teammate of your parents and Uzumaki Naruto, was told he could live within the village if they could pick a wife for him to restart his clan. Your mother was picked and…" Gaara gave him a sly smile, "You are not an Uchiha." Obito raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm not explaining *that* one."

Obito scrunched his face.

"The Hokage, Tsunade knew what would happen if Uchiha found out; you would be killed and your mother, if she was lucky, would be killed, if not tried for treason for going against the elders of the village. Tsunade-sama thought it was the safest thing to do was to let you seek refuge here. Something I wholeheartedly agreed to. Your mother saved mine and Kankuro's life. It was the very least I could do and save both of yours.

"I suppose you and your mother could go back now. It has been six years. I know through my connections that Haruno Sakura is considered missing, but no one is out looking for her. But she is probably still scared for your life.

"And I *will* take advantage of that, as Kazekage. Your mother has single handedly modernized our hospitals, whether she realizes it or not. She's saved hundreds of our shinobi and helped us create poisons and antidotes that are essential to the defense and safety of our village. And if she thinks staying here is the only option." Gaara shrugged, "Then I will let her hide behind my strength as long as she wishes."

He let Obito absorb that information. "But, I will not allow you to do the same." Obito tilted his head. "I'm giving you two options, Obito. You can stay in the academy, be held back by everyone there and your eventual team. Or, you can train under me; become my apprentice and I will teach you all I know and you will work closely with

Kankuro and Temari.

“Temari’s team just lost someone.” He said quietly. “They will not be ready for a new teammate for missions for a while, but you will train with them. And, when I feel you’re ready, I’ll let you start taking missions. Who knows, you might make Jounin by 12.” Gaara released the boy, who turned to stare at his swinging legs.

After a few minutes, Obito looked up to Gaara. “Did you ask mom?”

“No, this is your life, your decision. You can tell her and discuss it with her once you’ve gone home.”

The boy nodded slowly. Gaara looked back out at his village, allowing the feeling of the sand swirl around him. When he felt Obito move, he glanced back at him.

Obito was smirking, “I’ll make ANBU by 13.

III

His mom stood with her hands on her hips, a wooden spoon looming in her hand. She was one of the only people that could make him feel small, even though he wasn’t that much smaller than her.

Very, very small.

“You’re doing *what* ?” her voice was calm, but he knew better. He smiled as wide as he could. His hands were shaking, so he put them in his pocket.

“I’m going to graduate from the academy.”

“No,” she said quickly, “you’re too young.”

“Oh? Did I say I was going to?” His fingers pressed against the warm metal in his pocket. He gripped it, praying to gods to save him. “I meant to say I did.” He pulled out the metal headband. His fingers ran across the etched gourd. His heart soared. He looked up at his mother, whose face was blank but there was a fire in her eyes. “But I’m not joining a team!” he said quickly as he felt her chakra surge. “I’m going to work with the Kazekage!”

She stilled. “Did he put you up to this?” her voice was calm.

He can take care of himself. He’s the Kazekage . “He was the one that gave me this.”

He blinked and she was gone, the door slamming, shaking the house.

He looked back down at the headband. It was too big to fit across his forehead so he quickly tied it around his neck. He padded into the kitchen, the headband bouncing against his collar bone with small thumps. He grinned as he dragged a chair to the stove, turning the stove down, picking up a small spoon, stirring whatever concoction his mother was making. He tasted it before scrunching his face up, reaching for the pepper.

By the time his mother came back he was done eating, bathed and sitting on the floor of the living room, reading.

He froze as she stared at him down from the hall.

“Bed now. You *will not* be late in the morning.” Obito grinned and scrambled up, leaping to hug his mom.

Her arms wrapped around him, pressing his head into her chest.

“Thanks, Mom.”

III

“Your mornings will start with meditation.” The Kazekage said. Obito couldn’t help but grin. It was the most exciting lesson he’d ever had. “You need to learn to control your chakra so you can control sand.” Obito’s eyes widened.

“Like-like you?”

He nodded, “In the afternoon, you will spar with Kankuro. Once you are comfortable we will begin to introduce you to Temari’s team.” He grinned. “Then you will work with her in the mornings, and my lessons will be in the afternoon.”

Obito nodded.

“Let us begin.”

III

“Gathering sand to bend to your will takes immense concentration and skill. I was lucky.” Gaara stood a few feet from Obito in his office. There was a small alcove where Obito sat on a small cushion. “I had my mother’s chakra to help me. But you have to make up for that. You can already walk on water?”

Obito shrugged lazily, but his heart was hammering in his chest, stomach full of butterflies. “Only in the bathtub.”

Gaara nodded. “Very good. You will start with meditation. Learn to control your chakra inside your body before we start moving to external control. Moving sand in your hand to using it to stop a full attack.

The boy couldn’t help himself, “Cool…” he breathed.

Gaara smirked. “You will work here. While I work over there.” He pointed to his desk.

Obito grinned, “Kazekage first, teacher second.”

The Kazekage nodded.

III

Obito stood in the middle of a training ground, surrounded by swirling sand. Kankuro stood with his hands crossed over his chest, looking intimidating. He probably didn’t need that.

His weird face paint was enough.

“We will work on basic ninja arts.” He spoke calmly. “Hand signs, accessories and long/short distance training.”

Obito was almost hopping up and down. “What about Taijutsu?”

Kankuro smirked. “Your mother has that covered.”

Obito’s heart dropped. *Shit.*

III

The weeks flew by for Sakura now that Obito was out of the house from sunup to sundown. He never really talked much about the training, but he did seem happier. His smile seemed more genuine. He worked with Gaara and Kankuro during the week and their taijutsu training was on the weekends.

He was a bit clumsy, though not as clumsy as a boy his age should be. And he had decent balance. It was strange for Sakura to be out here; on a training field that wasn’t surrounded by trees. It was so open. She felt bare. It was a disadvantage she would need to work out before Obito outpaced her. Obito’s disadvantage was the sand stuck to him

like he was covered in water. He always had to stop and dust himself off before continuing.

He would always smile widely and tell her to give it all she had.

It made her heart soar.

(She didn't. He was six.)

III

"It's been six months, and you've improved greatly." Gaara nodded to Obito, who blushed. "We will start in the morning with sand manipulation before moving inside.

"Controlling the sand is similar to controlling the flow of your charka. You have strong control over your chakra and that will help you greatly." Obito watched as the sand moved around the Kazekage, but it never quite touched him. He lifted his hand and a mass of sand formed. "For the next few weeks, I want you to try to do this. Slowly," the Kazekage flicked his wrist and the mass slowly condensed, forming a tight sphere. "You will progress to this." The leader's eyes flashed to Obito. Who stood straighter, "This will take a lot of concentration. It will take a lot of chakra. Do not get discouraged if you can't do it at once." Obito took a steady breath.

Obito really didn't want to mess this up. "Okay, I understand." He nodded.

Gaara smiled. "Sit here." He gestured to a spot that had a wide circle of sand. "Start by just moving the sand. Don't touch it with your body, but simply reach out with your chakra and move the grains."

Obito looked up to his teacher, "I'll be honest. It doesn't sound easy."

Gaara nodded, "But after this training, it will seem so." Gaara turned, leaving Obito to meditate.

Obito sat, his mind focused on the movement of Chakra in his body. His skin tingled as he tried to push his chakra out, to *feel* the sand.

He felt a bit ridiculous.

For hours he sat out there, trying to extend his chakra, and do *something* , when he finally heard Gaara, chuckling. "Well, you were able to get the sand to move somehow." Obito tried to open his eyes

but quickly shut them back. Sand burned his eyes. He took a quick intake of breath and coughed as sand invaded his mouth.

He coughed, rubbing his eyes. “Sand is attracted to me.”

Gaara hummed. “It’s seems to like you a little more today than usual. As I thought, you’ll progress quickly. You just need control.” Obito felt a gentle hand on him. “Let’s get you cleaned off.”

III

“Have you ever thought of a mask or something?” Obito was shaking his head, freeing it of sand. He looked up at Kankuro.

“A mask?” Ever since he started his ‘sand wielding’ training months ago it seemed the sand couldn’t get enough of him. He couldn’t go outside without getting completely covered in it.

Kankuro shrugged. “Yeah, something that covers your nose and mouth.”

Obito shook his head. “Then what about my eyes?”

Kankuro rolled his eyes. “Come on; let’s get you some new gear.”

III

Sakura slammed the door shut. She sighed loudly.

It had been a long day.

“Obito! I’m home!” she listened but frowned when she got no response. She knew he heard her. She could sense him.

She kicked off her shoes and headed towards the living room. “Obito?” She rounded the corner, gasping.

Sitting in the middle of her living room was a stranger. It was covered head to toe in white clothing; White pants, white shirt and a white hood and mask. The only thing not covered in white were their eyes, which were covered in orange goggles. They were sitting cross legged on the floor, surrounded by a thin circle of sand.

She instantly pulled the kunai from her waist and hurled their head. Sand shot up from the floor. The person cocked their head as the kunai clattered to the floor right outside their circle with a loud ‘thunk’.

“Good parenting, Mom.” Her heart stopped. *Obito!?*

“Oh my god, Obito! I almost killed you!” she rushed towards him, dropping to her knees next to him.

He shrugged, “Not really. Your aim was a bit off. He pulled off the goggles and pulled the cloth off his head.

His silver and pink hair shot up and out to the left as his green eyes blinked up at her matching ones. He wore a skin tight black mask that didn’t seem to muffle his voice too much.

“Kankuro-sensei thought having a mask would help keep the sand out of my lungs. I picked it out. Pretty cool huh? Now I won’t get sand everywhere.”

Sakura smiled as she fell back on her heels. “Yeah…yeah it is.” He tilted his head slightly. “You just…you look like your father like that.” She cursed her higher voice.

“Yeah, I was going for-you…you okay, Mom?” He reached up and wiped her face. She bit her lip before everything cracked.

She pulled him close and cried.

III

Obito sat cross legged on the roof of the Kazekage’s tower. His whole body was almost covered, but Gaara could feel a pleased aura coming from him. Gaara watched him with a small smile. He had a small wall of sand, two feet high, surrounding him. It wouldn’t do much, but it was a start.

Gaara smiled.

“I think you’re ready to meet your team.”

Training

“I feel like this is my first day of school again…” Obito muttered, packing his lunch into his pack, flinging it over his shoulder. *Hopefully this is better than school…*

“Stomach curling dread with the fear of failure?” His mother asked cheerfully, cutting through his thoughts.

“That too.” He murmured.

She laughed, “That’s how everyone feels.” She tousled his hair, making him scowl. “You’ll do fine.” He shrugged walking towards the front door. “You know,” she said cautiously, “If you back out,”

He kept back a snort, “Nice try, Mom.” He pushed back the thought of showing back up to school, the teachers telling the students in that sympathetic voice, that he’s back and to be nice. He wouldn’t last two days before he’d have to leave the village and live on the mountain side for the rest of his life. And he was only six. He turned, forcing the brightest smile he could manage, “And besides! I hate school! It’s boring!” *Understatement of the year.* “I’d rather do this!”

“Obito…”

“It’ll be fun!” P*lease, let it be fun…* “I promise!” He tightened his hold on his pack and ran towards her, giving her waist a tight hug. “See you tonight! Have fun at work!” He dashed out the door, sighing deeply as the door clicked behind him. He looked around the dusty neighborhood before straightening, walking as tall as his four foot frame could carry him towards the training grounds.

III

This is worse than school … Obito stared blankly at the two older, taller, much more intimidating looking kids in front of him. Both were girls; one about five foot two, long black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were a deep blue, almost purple that felt like they cut into his soul. She wore black shorts that were almost covered with a white silky looking gi with billowy sleeves. It was tied off with a black tie. The other had very short cropped, light brown hair. She was no more than five feet. Her dark green eyes shot daggers at him. Her arms were crossed, and long dark brown sleeves covered her arms. She had long pants that matched. Both were wearing standard black

ninja sandals. Both had painted toenails. Also black.

Obito stood straight, his hands shoved in his pockets, to keep the two girls from seeing them shake.

“Mako, Hachiko, this is Obito, He’ll be training with us for a while.” Temari said cautiously.

There was silence for a few moments. Tension filled the air that Obito wasn’t sure he could cut with a knife. He might not be strong enough.

“Why?!” The smaller girl whined, her voice piercing his ear drums. He winced “We don’t need him! We’re fine the way we are!”

Obito felt a surge of rejection through his chest, but he refused to drop his eyes. *She’s lost a comrade. It’s only normal for her to react this way…I hope…*

“It’s easier to train with four people, Mako.” Temari-sensei said softly, but firmly.

Mako walked up to Obito, who’s heart slowed, face remaining unreadable. “He’s just some baby!” Mako raised his hands to shove Obito, but Obito’s reflexes kicked in. He stepped to the left, grabbing Mako’s wrist, twisting it behind her back, kicking out his right leg in a sweep, making Mako crumble to the ground. Obito’s eyes were wide in surprise as he stared at the older, bigger girl below him. He felt power surge through him. “Please don’t call me a baby.” He said as lightly as he could. Trying to sound cheerful as his blood pounded hard in his head. His grip tightening on Mako’s wrist, digging his small fingers into a pressure point under her wrist, making her cringe slightly.

“Enough.” He looked up to see Temari-sensei smirking. Obito released her, “For now, he’ll train with us three days a week. He might be a baby, but he’s not out here because they ran out of room in the academy.” Mako huffed, but said nothing. Temari-sensei looked at Obito. “You’ll train with Mako. She specializes in close combat. Hachi will work with you after you have gotten your bearings.” Temari-sensei walked to him, slapping him on his back, almost making his knees buckle. “Come on, Baby, let’s see what you’ve got.”

III

“You won’t get the upper hand on me again, kid.” Mako sneered, walking in a circle. Obito nodded, keeping up step for step. Obito

hadn't had much training in taijutsu, only what he and his mother had done. As Mako charged, Obito sidestepped, throwing a punch, missing as Mako dropped, doing a low sweeping kick, knocking Obito to the ground. Obito felt his head hit the ground hard, opening his eyes just in time to see a fist coming at his face.

His heart stopped as the fist stopped right in front of his nose. "Dead." Mako smirked, standing up and taking a few steps away from Obito.

Obito stood, brushing the sand off himself, he missed Mako charging, sending a side kick to his chest. Obito rolled on the ground, regaining his balance as crouched, breathing hard as Mako growled, "Come on, baby! If you want to hang with the big dogs you're going to have to do better than this!"

Obito felt heat rise to his face, making his mind swirl. As the older girl came rushing towards him, he narrowed his eyes, doing a half roll to the left, springing up from his hands, landing a back kick hard to Mako's jaw. Mako stumbled back as Obito felt the world around him calm, even the sand whipping through the air. Obito charged, moving faster than he thought he could as he built up chakra in his hands, stopping in front of Mako, landing a double punch in his stomach, missing a punch to the side of the face as Mako blocked. Obito jumped backwards as Mako threw a kick. While he recovered, Obito spotted an opening pushing chakra towards his feet, doing a tornado kick to Mako's floating ribs.

Mako's eyes widened as she crumbled to the ground for the second time that day. Obito dashed, jumping in the air, aiming a punch for Mako's face.

Mako cringed as Obito stopped inches from her face.

"Dead."

III

Sakura's attention was taken away from dinner preparations when she heard the front door open, closing softly. She heard feet fall lazily through the hallway, passing the living room, toward the back of the house. "Obito?" She wiped her hands on the towel hanging from the towel rack as she walked towards the hallway. She watched as a mysterious looking boy came walking through her house.

His hair was a sandy blond that matched the rest of him. He had a pair of cracked goggles hanging limply from his fingers. What she

thought was probably blood caked his white hood. It wasn't until he looked up at her did she see his green eyes standing out brightly between his black and blue face and the sand that stuck to every part of him. "You look beat." She whispered, tousling his hair, laughing as sand fell from his hair.

He shrugged, "You should see the other guy." She smiled, putting her hand on his face, sending healing chakra into his face. He smiled contently, closing his eyes leaning into her pulsing hand. She almost faltered, recalling a night Kakashi came home, beaten and blue, leaning into her healing hands.

Obito shoved her hand away, "That's enough, Mom. It's not too bad."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Just go wash up," she patted him on the back, "and don't track too much sand through the house."

He nodded, heading towards the bathroom. She smiled softly, leaning against the door frame as she watched him disappear, and the sound of water turning on.

I think he had fun . She sighed, smiling before heading back in the kitchen to finish dinner.

III

"This will be very hard. It will strain your body. But you can do this. Your chakra control is incredible. Just relax." Obito sat cross legged in front of Gaara, trying to calm his nerves. "You must use your chakra to move the sand. Not your mind. After practice, it will seem like your mind is moving the sand. It will be like the sand is a part of you."

"Is that how it feels for you Gaara-jii?" Obito pried an eye open.

Gaara nodded, sand swirling around him. "It is different for me. The sand has always protected me. But for you, you must teach it to do so. I don't know if anyone can learn this…" Obito frowned, making the Kazekage smile, "But if anyone can do it, it is you."

Obito took a shaky breath, nodding. "Alright. I'm ready."

The Kazekage nodded, picking up a small stone and tossing it at Obito. The sand weakly rose from the ground, skimming the bottom of the rock as it hit Obito in the face." Obito frowned. "Again."

III

“I swear, I’ve never seen anyone get as dirty as you. And I know, Uzumaki Naruto.” Sakura opened the door to let her little warrior trudge into the house. “I thought the Kazekage’s training would keep the sand *off* you.”

He shrugged. “I am one with the sand. The sand is one with me.” He muttered bitterly.

She sighed.“What was it today?” She smiled, closing the door behind her with a small click. “Keeping the beating back from the dreaded Mako, or *meditation* with the Kazekage?”

The boy shrugged slightly. “A little of both. And I’m *not* ‘keeping the beatings back.’” He huffed, “I am better than *that* . It’s been seven months now.” She watched her little ninja shake his head, letting sand rain in the entryway. She hadn’t seen any of his training outside what they did on the weekends, she could tell how much stronger he’d gotten. Both physically and mentally. He stands straighter, with more pride in himself. As much as she hated to admit, it was the right thing to let him become a genin at such a young age. She tousled his hair, watching the sand continue to fall out of his hair. “Are you a blond now?” She teased, continuing to shake his hair, sand falling out, but the silver underneath remained hidden.

“Stop it!” He moaned, trying to push her away. Sakura dropped to her knees pulling him close to her. He struggled, but was no match. “Get off, mom!” He fumed, but she just laughed.

She pulled him away, and smiled, “Come on, we’ll eat out.”

“No bath?”

She gave a mocked frown, “By the time we get to the restaurant, you’ll be covered in sand again, come on, I’m starving.” Obito smiled widely, grabbing her hand, making her heart melt.

“Well come on, Mom!” As the boy dragged her out the door Sakura sighed happily, letting the warm butterflies in her stomach settle contently.

He might be a little ninja, but he was still her little boy.

And I wouldn’t trade this for anything.

Gaara's Gift

Obito felt strangely calm as he dodged a punch aimed for his head. It had been almost a year since he had joined Temari-sensei's team for training and he could see how much he had improved. He was stronger, not having to rely on the chakra fist that his mother had taught him. His body had toughened, although he was seven, his body had become a machine; he was no longer sore after training for hours, his bruises barely recognizable. His speed had increased as well as his agility and stamina.

Not to mention his cursing.

"Shit." He murmured before being slammed to the ground by a high round kick. "What was that?" Obito slurred, standing up, "Did a little girl just show up, eh Mako?" Mako growled, charging. Obito parried a side kick, ducking down to do a sweep, kicking the older girl to the ground. "If you're going to kick, you might as well put your purse down." Obito smirked, blocking the fist to the face.

Mako grabbed Obito's blocking arm, pulling him around, knocking him off balance before smacking the boy in the face, knocking his goggles off. "At least my purse isn't as bulky as your stupid goggles, Babito."

Obito jumped away, fixing his goggles, cursing the stupid things. They *were* big and bulky but at least he could see through the sand. He'd advanced more than either he or Gaara-jii could have expected, moving the sand flowingly, even able to block rocks and light punches, but the moment the move is done, the sand falls everywhere, sticking to him, including his eyes. "Come on Babito; give me your best shot!"

Babito?

"Babito? What are we doing? Giving each other pet names?" Hachiko called from the sidelines laughing. It hadn't taken too long for Obito to gain acceptance of Hachiko, but Mako...

"Shut up Hachi!" Mako charged again. Obito did a roundhouse kick to spinning side kick to low sweep. Mako jumped the sweep, elbowing Obito hard in the shoulder, making him crumble. "Dead."

Mako still hated him.

Struggling to get to his feet, panting hard, Obito resisted the urge to use the sand at his feet to trip Mako.

"Again!" he shouted.

Mako shrugged and rushed in. Obito spun, jumping back a before building up a bit of chakra in his hand, rushing towards Mako. He abruptly stopped, pulling his hips hard, throwing a heel kick to her chest, expecting the block, shifting his weight on the falling foot, before slamming his hand into the girl's chest. She stumbled and fell to the ground, spitting up blood.

Obito walked over to her, "Dead."

III

Obito sat on a ledge on the main street. He was waiting for his cold drink he ordered from a stand across the way.

He sighed deeply. His hands shook and his whole body was sore, but he still felt like he could go a few more hours. He whistled, swinging his battered and bruised legs.

They called his number and hopped down, almost skipping to get his drink. As he turned back around, his heart dropped. "Fuck…" Three kids were going through his pack he'd left next to the ledge. He felt his energy drain as he recognized them all from the academy. He rolled his eyes, "There's nothing in there." He called with a heavy sigh, his legs feeling like lead. He could deal with Mako. He could go rounds with Mako for another few hours. But he didn't feel up to dealing with these guys for more than five seconds. "Lunch is long gone; you're too late to steal that." One of the boys stood straight, towering over Obito. Obito gave him a once over. "You've gotten a bit taller, Dan."

"And you're still a little shit." He poked him in his goggles. Obito didn't flinch.

"Just give me my pack back."

Dan shoved Obito hard, who only gave him a small step back. "What makes you so amazing, huh?" for some reason, the other boys laughed as they stood up. Dan gripped the front of Obito's shirt, pulling him up so they were eye to eye. Obito's feet dangled a half a foot off the ground. Sand whirled under them. "You're just a little shit, you pathetic, little, tiny, grain of sand! What makes you think you can be a

shinobi?!"

Obito shrugged, "My more elaborate vocabulary?"

Dan growled. "Fuck you!"

Obito's heart was beating fast in his chest. "Everyone *does* keep telling me I'm a genius…" Obito was baffled at how calm and mild his own voice was. "So, I guess that's why…" No one had *ever* told Obito he was a genius. Mako had called him a smart ass, but he didn't think that it counted.

Dan's face reddened. He wrenched the drink out of Obito's hand and hurled it over the ledge. Obito watched it fly. "Real mature." He said evenly. "I just got that." Obito looked up just in time to see a fist collide with his face. Dan dropped him, but he didn't stagger, didn't move. Blood soaked his mask, but he didn't move. He just stared.

Dan glaring down at Obito while he just blankly stared at the bully. He felt his right eye swell. *Great* . He braced himself as Dan punched him in the stomach.

He decided to drop to the ground. "The only reason you're out of the academy is because your mom is fucking the Kazekage." Obito's eyes widened. He looked up as rage filled him. The boys laughed. "You shouldn't even be in the *academy* , let alone out of it! Look at you! You little bastard-"

Obito felt a surge of chakra rip through him as a wall of sand hit Dan in a small tidal wave. Obito got to his feet as Dan struggled. Another wave of sand crashed into Dan and his friends. Obito let Dan finally get to his feet before he hit him with another.

And Another.

But Obito felt the strain of his chakra. And so did Dan as the waves got weaker and weaker. When the last one didn't knock him to the ground, Dan laughed. "Ohh! The baby bastard looks mad!"

Obito felt completely spent as Dan stalked back towards him. Obito took a step back as exhaustion washed over him."So scared!" A kid whose name Obito couldn't remember mocked him as Dan pulled back his fist.

Before Obito could move, he felt something cold on his neck. "Nah, kid's not mad." Obito's eyes widened as Dan froze. Mako stood next to

Obito, smirking madly, “You should see him when he’s mad. Last week on a mission, a guy from Rock made fun of his shoes and Obito tore his head off with his bare hands.” Obito looked between Mako and the now pale boys.

“Who-who do you think you are?” Dan was a little taller than Mako, but looked so much smaller.

“It doesn’t matter.” She said darkly, standing chest to chest with Dan. “But you’ll be my bitch if I see you fucking with my teammate again.” She took a step closer, Dan took two steps back. “Why he hasn’t made your face meet the pavement yet, no one knows, but you mess with him again, your ass is mine.”

Dan looked at Obito and scoffed, “That little shit couldn’t beat up a punching bag.”

Mako grabbed Dan by the shirt, lifting him up a few feet. “I saw him kill a man with his bare *fucking* hands.” She whispered. “He’s taken pity on you and not made your face look like the piece of trash you are.”

Obito felt out of body as he watched as his sparring partner hurled the bully into a garbage can.

“Get lost.”

Dan picked himself up, glaring at Mako before glaring at Obito. “Watch your face!” He looked around, “Come on guys, let’s go.” Obito watched with astonishment as they walked away.

Mako scoffed, “Fucking scum.” She frowned, hands on her hips. Obito watched as she picked up his bag and handed it to him and a cup of cold lemonade. “Here.”

He took them tentatively.

“Thanks, Mako-senpai.”

“Nah, just Mako. Come on Babito, I’ll walk ya home.”

They walked in silence as Obito reeled through the last half hour.

“Why did you tell them I killed a man? I haven’t been on any missions yet.”

Mako shrugged, “Why not. They won’t know the difference.” Obito

stared at her before taking a long sip of the lemonade. “Why didn’t you just beat the shit out of those guys?”

Obito shrugged. “Why?”

Mako snorted.

Obito sighed, “Cause I’m better than them.” He said softly. He didn’t say it to gloat. It was just…a fact. Mako watched him seriously. “It’s been like this for the past couple of years. After I joined the academy. I just…understood everything better than them. It was always so simple for me.”

“And everyone’s always jealous of the genius kid.” Mako murmured.

“It didn’t help that I was smaller than them, my relationship with the Kazekage, my silver and pink hair, etcetera, etcetera.” He counted off his fingers that weren’t holding his drink. As they made it to Obito’s house, Mako kept walking, opening the door and walking in.

Just make yourself at home .

“I came to find you to tell you about a mission.” Mako said.

“No training then?”

Mako shook her head. “No, you’re coming with us this time.”

III

“Task is simple.” Temari-sensei said. We go in, pick up the scroll, and say thank you and leave.” Obito nodded. “The trick is getting it through the Wind country to the Daimyo. I don’t know what’s in the scroll, but we just get it to him, ask no questions.”

“We usually never know what’s in it.” Mako whispered.

Temari ignored her, “Hachi and I will go retrieve it; Obito will detain the scroll until we get to the Daimyo.

“Since you’re the smallest.” Mako elaborated.

“Shut up. Mako.” Temari-sensei. Obito grinned. “Stay out here, out of trouble. We’ll be back in ten.”

Obito watched his other teammates leave as he and Mako waited outside. “Are these how most missions go?” They moved to the shade

of a small bush, sitting next to it.

Mako shrugged, “The less exciting ones. You just have to be prepared for anything.” Obito nodded, pulling out a small sack from a pouch on his leg.

Mako nodded her head. “What’s that?”

“Sand.” Obito dumped the sand out of the bag and set the bag aside. “The key is for me to be able to shift the sand back into the bag.” Mako nodded, seemingly uninterested.

“Cool.”

Obito focused on lifting the sand off the ground and pulling it over. It was an exercise he and Gaara-jii-sama had been working on for a while and Obito was sure he’d be able to drag all the sand over at once soon.

“What's the point?”

Obito smiled. “Chakra control. If I can move this small amount, I can move a bigger amount with more control.”

“So you can do more than just make tidal waves?”

“So I can make giant walls like the Kazekage.” Obito smiled. “I’m not really interested in making the coffin thing, but I’d like to use it defensively.”

Mako nodded. “Coffin wouldn’t be too bad though. For capturing. Not…” Mako curled her lip. “For *squelch* .”

Obito nodded. “Yeah…I-I don’t need that.”

“Oh!” Mako sat up straight. “You could make walls for *me* to walk on so I can get better angles and more power from my attacks!”

“That’s an idea.” He mused. “It’s something to work towards.”

“It wouldn’t be hard for me,” Mako went on, “it’d be like climbing the side of a regular wall, or water or something.”

Obito smiled as all the sand made it back in the bag. “This is much better than trying to beat each other’s face in.”

Mako gave him a toothy grin. “Definitely.”

III

Obito's sand blocked all Gaara's rocks, which had grown to the size of Gaara's fist. "Good." The sand crashed down, half of it sticking to the small ninja, who ripped off his goggles and hood, exposing a clean, red faced boy. He was panting heavily. Gaara smiled. "Once you grow and have more chakra, you'll be able to use it longer." Gaara crossed the training ground, summoning the sand in a small ball. "Now this."

Obito took a shaky breath, but nodded. Holding his right arm with his left he closed his eyes and Gaara watched as sand started spiraling towards the boy's open palm. It wasn't perfect, but it was close as he'd seen to a perfect ball yet.

"Good."

Gaara took a step back. "Now trap me in the sand." Obito's eyes snapped open, the ball crumpled away.

"What?"

"Defensive maneuver number one. Capture your enemy before they can harm you. Or your comrades."

Obito's chakra flashed and Gaara watched as a tidal wave flew over him. He was about to speak when the sand on all sides began swirling and moving up his legs. It reached his knees before it stopped. Obito's face was covered in sand again; sweat leaving small gaps
"Impressive."

"Mako-Mako and I." he gestured between them. "Do this."

"Release." The sand and the boy collapsed.

Gaara stepped out of the sand. "Very, very good." He turned from the boy. "It seems you and your teammates are getting along better.

"Hachi…is very kind and helps with long distance, but Mako and I… are more…" he heaved again.

"Cohesive?"

"Temari-sensei says it's natural…" he sighed, "With short range fighters."

Gaara shrugged. "I'm sure it is." Gaara turned back to see Obito rising to his feet. "Come inside, I have something for you."

III

Obito was cleaned and standing tall as Gaara ushered him into his office. “You have come quite a ways in your almost two years of training. You’ll soon take missions outside of the Wind and you’ll need something to help you.” Gaara walked to the corner where a black sheet covered a two foot tall blob. Gaara looked back at Obito. “You’ll start growing soon, but this will do for now.” He pulled the sheet and Obito gasped.

“This was my first gourd.” Gaara felt warmth spread through him. “And now, it’s yours.” Gaara looked down at the small gourd. The leather strap was the only thing that was new. “I’ll need to teach you how to properly care for it, but it’s sturdy. It will serve-” He stopped as he felt arms encircle his waist. He looked down to see Obito burying his face into his robes.

“Thank you.” Obito choked. Gaara’s eyes widened as he felt small wet drops hit his robes. “Thank you for everything.”

Gaara patted Obito’s head. “Of course.”

A New Mission

“What's a D-mission like?” Obito asked as nonchalantly as he could, trying to hide his excitement. “Is it hard?” Hachiko and Mako looked at him strangely before giggling.

Temari-sensei glared at the two girls. “Your mission is simple. Help unload the fruit crates.”

Obito raised a brow, “Fruit crates?”

Mako nudged Obito as she walked past. “Come on, pip-squeak.”

III

“So this is what normal genin do?” Obito asked.

“Yeah. We get stuck doing it from time to time.” Mako said, unceremoniously dropping a crate of oranges. They were in the cellar of a small grocery store. She ran her hand across her forehead and up into her hair. Her hair stuck straight up before flopping to the left slightly. She dramatically collapsed over top of the crate.

Hachiko carefully made her way down the steps. “We usually get more exciting missions, but sometimes we have these simple ones.” She gently set down her crate of apples.

Obito nodded. “Yes, simple.” He was not going to admit his fingers were numb and probably splintery. And his arms were dead weights.

Mako ran a hand through her short hair, pulling tufts at the side of her head, making her look slightly manic. “I hope we get something not so lame soon.”

Hachiko walked out of the cellar, towards the wagon that held the fruit. Obito and Mako followed quickly. “Well, it's your fault, Mako-chan.”

“It's more your fault than anything.” She pointed at Obito. Making his heart stop. “You're the new kid with no experience!”

“And please don't blame Obito.” Hachiko grabbed another crate, there were six left. “It's really your lack of skills that keep us behind.”

Obito watched the long haired girl smile widely as the tom-boy

grumbled, shuffling up and grabbing the largest crate-one full of watermelons. Obito was cautious with what he said next. “You're-joking?”

“Nope!” Hachiko said cheerfully. Giving him a wink before she walked past.

“Yes!” Mako all but yelled. “I don't weigh the team down!” her face reddened. “It's just...Hachi-chan is....” Mako bit her lip.

“A good shot.” Hachiko prompted.

Mako kicked a crate half-heartedly. “Yeah.”

They finished unloading the boxes, and, to Obito's relief, were given the rest of the day off.

As Obito got ready to leave, Hachiko gasped, spinning to look at Obito, eyes wide. “You haven't got to spar me properly have you!” She lunged at him, grabbing his arm before he could open his mouth. “Come on! Let's go.”

All Obito could hear was Mako's evil laughter.

III

Obito tightened the strap of his gourd, trying to relax. They were at one of the training grounds; it was a vast open, desolate place that held no cover except a few boulders.

Perching on top of one of those rocks was Mako, waving cheerfully. Obito readjusted his goggles, willing his sand out of the gourd. “Where is she?”

“Oh she's here!” Mako said cheerfully, looking around at the empty landscape. She was practically laughing. She gave a big shrug. “Somewhere!”

“It's the trick with long range fighters in the sand. They are easily lost until you're dead.”

“But there is no where-”

“ *Ninja* !”

Obito was going to ask for a clarification when he sensed something moving fast. He threw his sand up, slowing the projectile enough that

it didn't hit his face.

He missed the next one. He hissed as a senbon sliced his leg.

“Don't worry!” Mako sang, way too giddy. “These aren’t poisonous!”

“Thanks...” Obito closed his eyes and formed a dome over top, reinforcing it the best he could. *The easiest way to fight her is to draw her out.* He didn't think Mako's heckling was the best idea. There was a *thunk* over his head. He saw the point of a kunai sticking out of the top of his dome. He inspected the angle and grinned.

“It's a shame I'm my mother's son.” He whispered, a few hand seals and his dome collapsed, he and his sand vanishing underground. He was surprised to not hear Mako call something out.

He moved the sand around him, sweating under the pressure. It was zapping his chakra fast-he only had one shot. After a few more minutes and meters, he made two last hand signs before shooting out of the ground, widely grabbing. Sand rose above him, crashing down hard. He tried to keep control, tightening it as best he could.

He ended up half buried in sand, quickly losing feeling in his lower half. He was completely drained.

He heard a small chuckle. He opened his eyes to see Hachiko standing on his mound of sand. “Close, but it needs some work.” She smiled.

“Good.” Mako snorted. “At least we know he's not all powerful.”

Obito sighed, resting his head in the sand. Mako and Hachiko grabbed his arms, hauling him to his feet. “That's a lot of chakra to use for someone as small as you.” Hachiko noticed. “I'm surprised you lasted that long.

Obito shrugged. “Real...good...control...” He leaned into Hachiko, closing his eyes.

Mako grinned. “Best shit I've seen out of any of the new genins.” Mako looked to Hachiko. “We'll be the hottest looking bunch at the Chuunin exams!”

“Chuunin exams?”

“Yeah...” They started dragging him back to the village. “We'll be doing them this year.”

“We weren't ready two years ago.”

“*I* wasn't ready two years ago.” Mako's face was red.

“She's the best taijutsu fighter in our group. I just had a lot of extra help from Temari-sensei. She said she might train me how to use the fan one day.” Her eyes glossed over slightly. She bit her lip to keep herself from smiling. Obito grinned.

“Jumu was my training partner. We weren't specialized in anything.” Mako frowned. “But we could improvise.”

Obito stayed silent as they walked.

“But this year we'll be ready for sure!” Mako cheered after a few moments. She grinned at Obito. “We still have some months, we'll whip you into shape!”

“Soon we can all train together.” Hachiko cheered, almost tripping Obito.

“Boys against girls!”

“Boy against girls.” Obito said weakly.

The girls laughed.

III

“I say we blow it up.”

Obito gaped at Hachiko. She had her hands on her hips, looking the cactus up and down. She shook her head. “It’s hideous.”

“Yeah…” Mako said slowly, warily. “But...Sakura-san will-”

“It's *hideous* .” She repeated.

Obito’s eyes narrowed, “Are you sure you’re Hachiko?”

“The rational, level headed person of our team who doesn’t do anything spontaneous?”

“I was thinking about blowing things up.” Obito said weakly.

Hachiko put a finger to her chin before shrugging. “Let’s at least catch it on fire.”

III

Sakura was reading a letter from her Shishou on the couch when she felt… *off*

She sat up. “Obito?” He wasn’t due home for a few hours, but she thought she could feel his chakra-

Thooom!

Pictures rattled and books fell off shelves. Sakura jumped to her feet, her heart beating fast as she felt the chakra burn in her veins. The letter was forgotten as Sakura slid into the hallway, slamming into the wall before pumping her feet towards the front door. *Has there been an attack!?* Her mind reeled with all the scenarios that could be happening. *Obito will have to fight-he’s not ready to fight! He’s just* - She wrenched the door open to see three sandy figures crouched in her front yard, arms over their heads. Her neighbors were all in their front yard as well, staring at the smoke billowing in the sky, whispering to each other.

ANBU were landing in her yard, as her blood boiled. She recognized the small figure, quivering. Small chunks of cacti were sticking off them. She marched through the ANBU, grasping the sandy figure, grabbing him by the back of his shirt and hoisting him up.

Despite the situation, despite her anger, she couldn’t help but think there would be one day she wouldn’t be able to lift her son by the clothes and watch him dangle.

He’d eventually get too big.

Behind his goggles, his eyes were wide with terror as he looked at her. “It wasn’t me.”

“ *It was him* !” Two other sandy forms emerged, pointing fingers at her son. Obito’s eyes widened even more as he shook his head, sand falling everywhere.

“It wasn’t me!”

“It was the girl in white!” A random voice called out. There was an ' *eep'* from the taller figure.

“It was her! Obito told her it wasn’t a good idea!” A high pitched voice rang from the other sandy figure.

“What happened to team camaraderie?!” The tall one hissed.

“What about team camaraderie!?” Obito said sarcastically, trying to wiggle out of Sakura's grasp.

Sakura sighed, dropping Obito.

“Haruno-san,” An ANBU spoke.

She waved him off, “It’s alright. Just…”

“I’ll inform the Kazekage.”

She pinched her nose, “You do that. I’ll deal with them.”

With that, the ANBU disappeared. She felt the eyes of the neighborhood on her. “So, you’re team Temari?”

Obito laughed nervously. “Mom, this is Mako and Hachi-”

“Which one of you decided to blow up my cactus?” She hated it, but dammit, it was serving a purpose!

Obito and the short haired one pointed at the one with long hair. “Hachiko, Haruno-san.” The girl bowed deeply.

Sakura smiled, “Hachiko?” her smile turned into more of a grimace. “Clean it up. You two?” Obito jumped slightly. “Backyard.”

Sakura stalked towards the backyard. The two followed. “It was nice to meet you Haruno-san!” Hachiko called cheerily.

Sakura took a deep breath.

III

“So it's just you and your mom?” Mako called from the living room as Obito walked out of the bathroom. He'd changed from his 'traditional white ninja garb' as Temari-sensei called it to a pair of navy blue shorts and a gray long sleeve shirt.

It had become a bit of a pattern. When Team Temari weren't off on a mission, Mako would follow Obito home after training and stay with him until Mom got home/ran Mako out of the house.

“Yeah, what about it?” He said with a little sting in his voice.

Mako shrugged. “Just wondering. Didn't know if your mom had a new guy or something.”

Obito peaked his head into the living room. Mako was doing crunches. “New guy?”

Mako rolled her eyes. “Dude, everyone knows what everyone’s not supposed to talk about.” Obito frowned. “Plus, we see your father-guy-whatever sometimes, and it just makes me wonder, ya know.”

“You see my dad?” Obito's heart stopped. “Where!? When!? Does he-”

“Chill out.” Mako waved her arm, hauling herself off the floor, making her way out the room. “We haven't actually, like, seen him or anything. Well, we've *seen* him, but not-” Obito pushed Mako against the wall.

“Spit it out!” His eyes burned. He felt like he was thirsty, dying to hear *anything* about him. Not even Baa-chan, in her infrequent visits would say anything about him.

Obito would be lying to himself if he said there wasn't a bit of him who thought he might have been dead.

Mako eyed the boy. “Hey, have you *really* never met him?” Obito pushed himself off his teammate, stalking out of the living room and into the kitchen. Mako was quick on his heels. “Whoa! Really!?” Mako hopped on the counter, cutting Obito off. “Like, so the story goes that your mom came with you to the village in the middle of the night. Two days after some Uchima came and was causing all this racket.” She was excited, her voice shot up and her arms moved dramatically about. “And-and the *Kazekage* came and gave him the old one-two! Telling him if he ever came back then, you-know-what!

“The whole village was mad, he was acting like a lunatic! Banging on doors and stuff, scaring people. And the Kazekage told him to fuck off!” She hoped down.

“Then,” She paused dramatically. “Then some pink haired woman from Konoha shows up and the Kazekage is like 'Sure! You can stay!' The village protects her cause the Uchima-”

“Ha.” He corrected. “Uchi *ha* .”

“Whatever, Uchima guy was a total dick.” She furrowed her brows. “But then he kept coming back, and everyone was getting sick of it.”

Mako pulled him in close. “I heard they would have revolted against the Kazekage to get you all chucked out if your mom hadn't *single-handedly* saved like-fifteen kids from some poison thing.” Mako nodded. “Saving kids is the way to make friends.”

Obito nodded.

Mako shook him slightly. “But, you know, no one knows the real truth but your mom, and I guess...well...you were a baby...” Mako raced to the door, looking down the hallway before rushing back. She put her head near his ear. “I heard that Hatake Kakashi came and wandered the village a few times. Just *looking* around and stuff.” Obito turned his head and almost smashed his face into her nose. She nodded quickly. “Lady six doors down from me says he liked it better when he came. Much quieter, so polite. Told him so. Said he would smile under that rouge mask of his and say 'thank you' and say he wasn't looking for the same thing Uchima was.” She rolled her eyes. “Whatever that means. We thought he always *knew* you guys were here, but just trying to be sneaky 'bout it.”

They were quiet for a few minutes. Obito's heart raced as his stomach churned as he counted his breaths.“I-” He started. “I don't even know if he knows I exist.”

He eyed Mako, who leaned away slightly, gaping. “What do you mean, don't know you exist?!”

He looked away. “I doubt it.” He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Mako sighed. “I don't know if you know this, but Temari-sensei is the liaison of Suna to Konoha.” she peaked her head down the hallway. “It's where we go all the time.” Obito jumped away. “It’s what I mean by ‘we see him’ a lot!”

Obito gaped at her. “What?”

She shrugged. “Well, not *all* the time.

“It's why you stay behind.” Mako moved closer to Obito. “It's some scheme Gaara-sama has come up with. But you couldn't come with us for a while. While you were still training. But once you are closer to chuunin level, and we could start taking...” Mako winked, “'Higher ranked' missions-” she emphasized the quotes with her fingers. “You could start coming with us.

“It's not like these missions are boring or anything. Usually we're doing *something* for someone. Escorting, retrieval, things like that.

“But we always end up in Konoha for a few days.” All of Mako's teeth were showing.

Obito started trembling. Was this all planned out? Some crazy scheme?

“What about my mom?” He couldn't keep the excitement from his voice. He looked up at the entrance to the kitchen, half expecting her to be there.

“I don't know.” Mako sounded just as excited. “She stays in the hospital all the time, I doubt she even knows there's a liaison.”

I could meet him, I could meet him! Finally!

“But! There's a catch!” Mako said, snapping Obito out of his thoughts.

“What's that?”

“We can't just go *looking* for him, ya know?” Mako poked him for emphasis. “We've all been warned that once you *do* start going on missions with us, you're to stay out of sight. Which, with your little get-up won't be difficult.”
Obito was getting the hang of Mako's terrible code-talk. “But if we run into him-”

“And we just kind of call you Haruno on accident-”

“Or my hood slips-”

“Or we call you by your nick-name 'Son of Hatake!'” She straightened suddenly, before slouching, crossing her arms.“There is that one guy though.”

“What guy.”

“The Uchima guy!”

“Ha.”

“Whatever! The guy that wants to kill you!” Mako paused, “Maybe?”

“He doesn't want to kill me.”

Mako laughed. “No.” She shook her head. “Shikamaru-sensei told us he's not even around Sakura *trees* ! He sets them *on fire* .” She nodded. “He'd totally off you if he knew you were her spawn.” She frowned. “And probably kill the other guy too...”

They were silent for a moment.

Mako clapped him on the back, almost knocking him over. “Either way, we'll think of something!” The door clicked and they both froze.

“Obito! I'm home! Is Mako-kun still here?”

“Don't worry about anything! We'll figure it out! I promise!” She whispered, heading towards the hallway. “I've got your back!”

Obito snorted, “I'll be the one watching your ass.”

“Obito!”

Shit .

His mother stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, looking angry.

“Well!” Mako clapped her hands together. “Look at the time! My mother is worried sick no doubt!” She tried to weasel her way past his mother, but she had her by the shoulder in a death grip.

“You!” she seethed. “Not in my house, *ever again* .”

“You know,” She squeaked. “I-I didn't teach him that one.”

“Get out.”

“We leave in two days, *Haruno!”* Mako called before the door slammed.

“Where are you going in two days?”

Obito's heart was beating loudly in his chest. His hands shook, so he shoved them in his pockets. He shrugged. “Beats me.”

Konoha

Obito took a deep breath, trying to calm himself as they walked through the forest. *There are so many trees.* “It's really wet...but not...” He pulled at his long sleeve shirt collar. “I think they have to have gills in Konoha.” He pulled down his mask.

Mako rolled his eyes. “It's humidity you idi-omph!” Mako doubled over as Hachiko elbowed her hard in the stomach.

Obito smirked.

“Leave him alone.” Hachiko hissed. “He's never been in Fire.” Hachiko looked over to Obito, smiling. “And yes. They all have gills. But they cover them with genju-”

Mako regained herself, jumping on Hachiko's back, putting her in a headlock. “Don't encourage him!”

“Hey!” Temari-sensei snapped, making all three freeze. Temari-sensei looked at each one of them before turning back around, leading them through the forest. Mako released her grip on Hachiko's neck. Mako leered at Obito. “We'll get you a snorkel once we get there.”

Obito stopped. “What's a snorkel?”

“We should be there in an hour.” Temari-sensei called. “Be careful.”

Obito sighed. Before they left the village, Temari-sensei and Gaara-jii had a *lengthy* conversation with all of them. Which was mainly Temari-sensei barking orders and Gaara-jii nodding with a strange smile on his face.

“ *Mask up at all times, hair covered.” She glared at the girls, “Please no screaming his name at the top of your lungs. No looking for anyone, no starting fights.” She looked between Obito and Mako. “Just keep your nose down and let us get this done, okay?” Temari-sensei looked to her brother, “Anything else?” She sounded like his mother as he ran down his list of excuses as to why he didn't need to shower. Her arms were crossed and foot tapping- just like his mothers.*

Gaara just smiled. “Have fun and tell the Hokage I say hello.” Temari-sensei rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything.

He thought of running into his father on the street. The bigger man

brushing into Obito, knocking his hood down. When they turn to apologize, they would look into each other's eyes and just *know* . Obito ripped his mask up over his face as he started grinning madly, muffling his giggles as he practically skipped behind his team. Mako tried to look annoyed, but was smiling. 'Don't worry!' She mouth. 'We'll find-'

Everyone froze. Hachiko pulled out a scroll from her leg pouch. Temari-sensei's hand reached for her fan strapped to her back. Mako was down in a crouched position.

Obito calmed. His sand stirring in his gourd.

Someone was coming. Fast.

“This doesn't feel right.” Temari-sensei whispered. “They know we're coming.”

As the leaves began to rustle, voices could be heard.

Obito narrowed his eyes, heart rate slowing as he let the sand from his gourd stir. He crouched, legs apart as he felt himself go completely calm.

The person was getting closer and closer. He felt Mako come up next to him. “You ready, Obito?” Obito nodded, fingers twitching.

A form dashed through the trees as a giant gust of wind rushed towards the figure. Sand was up and over Team Temari as Hachiko opened a scroll, releasing senbon at the attacker. The attacker dodged the flying sticks as a sharper gust of wind struck him.

A substitution justu helped the man escape the wind, dropping down a few meters away. Two sand walls appeared to stop his escape as Mako ran up the sides, sliding on the sand as she used her weight and gravity to land an axe kick on the man's shoulder. The man staggered as Mako jumped back. “Now!” She screamed and Obito released the sand, letting it crash over top of the man. Obito strengthened his hold on the sand, gripping it tightly with his chakra, condensing it into tighter mass. The man struggled to stand against the weight of the sand. Obito gritted his teeth and he moved the sand up, trying to keep the man from breaking up the sand. The man grinned.

“You think this putty will keep me back?” Obito crashed another wave of sand over the man.

“That's enough, Obito.” His teacher's voice was far away, but her hand was on his shoulder. His eyes narrowed as he put more into his attack. He flicked his wrist, making the sand swirl up the man's body to his neck. The hand patted his shoulder. “Good job.”

“Any...time.” He said through gritted teeth. Hachiko released one senbon that stuck in the man's neck.

The grin slid off his face as his eyes widened. He struggled, trying to break the hold of the sand. His elbows and fingers began to show as Obito took a deep breath, holding him tight.

A dramatic battle cry filled the area as Mako rushed towards the man. “Pass out already!” She screamed before punch the guy between the eyes.

The man's body relaxed instantly.

Obito kept his hold.

“Obito. Let. Go.” Temari-sensei's voice seemed close, but so far. “You've done well.” Temari-sensei's voice softened, but he *couldn't* let go. He forced the sand to tighten. Mako was still standing near him. What if he woke up? What would happen to his teammate?

He had to hold him. His heart was beating fast now. He had to-

“Hachiko! Before he strains himself!”

He felt a small prick and his vision began to fade. He felt the sand fall around him like rain. He felt so relaxed as he heard more voices. Someone called out Sensei's name. Arms wrapped around him as blackness overtook him.

III

“Hey! We caught that bad dude! Don't yell at us!” Mako's voice seemed to be coming at him through a long tunnel.

“This could be troublesome!” A man's voice snapped. “I told you this was a bad idea!”

“It'll be fine.”

“I don't see how *this* is fine.” Obito shifted slightly, checking his body. His shoes were gone and so was his mask and goggles. “You *carried* him on your shoulders from an attack from his own teammate!”

“He wasn't releasing!” Hachiko's voice sounded close to him. He opened his eyes heavily, looking at the blurry girl at his *bed* side. *How'd I get in a bed* ? “He was going to hurt himself.” He groaned, causing Hachiko to gasp. “He's awake.”

“What the fuck did you do?” His voice was groggier than he anticipated.

She grinned sheepishly, “I poisoned you so you'd release.”

“You were going to pass out anyways.” Mako was sitting at the far end of the bed.

Obito struggled to sit up. Hachiko helped him into a sitting position as he looked around. It was very plain. It had one bed and a small stand with a broken alarm clock. There were piles of books littering the floor and a shougi board with the pieces scattered on the floor.

He looked up to the man in the room. His eyes were wide, mouth slightly agape as he looked at the boy. His hair was in a high ponytail, making his head look like a pineapple.

Obito stated such. “You know your head looks like a pineapple?”

The man sighed, pinching his nose. “Woman,” He groaned.

Temari-sensei smacked him in the gut. “It's not like this was news to you! You should have known this was going to happen!”

Mako cackled. “That's Temari-sensei's boyfriend.”

A book soared across the room, Mako ducking just in time. “Shut it.” Temari-sensei scowled, face slightly red.

III

“So that guy we caught had just stolen some scroll thing.” Hachiko explained as they sat at a bench near Temari-sensei's boyfriend's house. “And so we stopped him before he could get too far out of the village.”

Mako slid up next to Obito, holding three ice cream cones. “We saved the day.” She handed one to each of them. “Good job team!” Mako took a bite of ice cream. “Though next time, when Temari-sensei says release, you gotta release!” She whacked him slightly on the back of the head. “You'll drain all your chakra and we'll have to drag your ass

back home.” Mako glared at him. “That's fine now, since you're small, but when you get bigger we won't be able to haul you as well.”

“Unless he stays this small forever,”

He scowled at Hachiko. Mako shook her head, “No way, his dad is huge.”

Obito perked at this, “He is?” He always guessed he was Gaara-jii’s height. Maybe Kankuro-sensei’s.

“Yeah, we'll have to drag you by the leg.” Hachiko nodded solemnly.

Obito frowned, “I just have to get better-”

“At what? Having more chakra?” Mako scoffed. “It doesn't take *skill* . It takes time. When you get bigger, your chakra will get bigger too.”

“That was a terrible explanation.”

“But you get it, and that's all that counts.” After a few minutes she sighed. “Man! What are we gonna do!” She sighed, slumping back against the bench. “Two more days of being bored! There's nothing to do here!”

“I...” Obito paused for a second, looking around, “I thought-”

“He's not here.” Mako said gloomily. “It was one of the first things Shikamaru-sensei said when we got here. *'It a good thing Kakashi-senpai isn't here!* ” Mako frowned.

Obito continued eating his ice cream. “What about that Uchiha guy? He's supposed to be scary?”

Mako eyed him. “The Uchiha guy? He doesn't do fucking shit!”

Hachiko nudged him. “We've heard that too. But all he does is just sit in this big compound. Sitting.”

Obito raised a brow. “Sitting?”

“Yeah, Konoha's pretty boring.” Mako kicked her feet as she finished her ice cream. “We can't even train. They might learn some secrets or some shit.” She rolled her eyes.

“She was hoping that with you, our time here would be more exciting.” Hachiko whispered.

“Sorry.” Obito said, finishing his ice cream and standing up, stretching. He pulled at his clothes. The long sleeves were great for the desert, but he'd been outside for less than an hour and he was already sweating. This wasn't going to work. “Well, I need something else to wear.” He looked at the girls. “I'm going shopping.”

Mako groaned. “I'm surrounded by girls!”

III

Obito was up in a tree. It was weird, being in a tree. It was shady and cool in the trees. He leaned against the trunk, his gourd dangling from a thick branch above his head. It was even weirder being in a sleeveless shirt. In the desert, you didn't go sleeveless because of the sun. Here, you'd die from heat stroke. He swapped his light colors for dark; wore slim black pants and a sleeveless-hooded shirt. He didn't bother with his mask. It's not like anyone would recognize him. He didn't look like his mom (except for the eyes, a good excuse to get the pair of sunglasses) and apparently no one knew what his dad's face looked like. He kept his hood up and used the time to practice using his chakra to keep the hood up.

They'd been in the village for two days and he was still trying to figure out how his life would have been here.

He'd spent the last couple days roaming the village with his teammates, eating the somewhat strange food and browsing the shops. They'd sat on the heads of the Hokage's (a little weird to have their heads just up on a mountain side, Obito thought) and went *swimming* in one of the nearby rivers.

Obito had never seen so much water.

But as much as those things were interesting, it just wasn't Suna. The sand not in his face all the time was a plus. But it was so *hot* .

He loved his village. The Kazekage was great and he loved his team. He couldn’t imagine living here and seeing them pass by and not know Team Temari. He sighed, closing his eyes, leaning up against the trunk of the tree. He let his foot dangle off the side of the branch.

The trees-he had to admit-trees weren't bad though.

“Come on, tell us.” Obito heard voices coming from below. He closed his eyes, focusing on his chakra until a small cry put him on edge. He looked down to see four boys and a girl, who was pressing herself

against the base of his tree. He reached over and grabbed his gourd.

“Tell us who is really your *mommy* .” Obito knew that tone. A bully tone. He gritted his teeth as he masked his chakra. This girl was getting bullied. The boys were no doubt genin by their size (though he couldn’t say much).

She pressed herself into the tree. Her hair was dark red and straight. “I don’t understand!”

One of the boys laughed, “I bet it could be that Haruko woman. Maybe *that’s* why she left.”

Obito’s eyes narrowed as sand slowly oozed out of his gourd.

Her eyes widened, “I don’t-don’t know who that is! I swear! My mommy is-”

One of the boys, the tallest and no doubt the leader, grabbed her red hair. “You’re a stupid girl, you know that!” She was crying. “Your hair is red.” He pulled her hair, making her stumbled off the tree and towards the boys. “Your mother’s hair is black and your father’s hair is blond. Do the math.”

The girl sniffled but stood a little taller. “That’s ‘Hokage-sama’ to you.” The boy’s face reddened as his fist raised, rushing towards her face.

Obito’s chakra surged as his sand shot down and grabbed the boy's hand, freezing it inches in front of her face. Before the other boys could react, they were engulfed in sand, leaving only their heads showing.

“You’re the stupid one.” Obito said, grabbing his gourd and jumping down from the tree. “Attacking, and harassing the Hokage’s daughter.”

The boy’s eyes flickered over his forehead protector, eyes narrowing, “This is none of your business Sand Shinobi.”

Obito’s hands found their pockets and he shrugged. “You’re right. It is none of my business. Maybe her mother is the Hokage-sama’s wife or someone else…though, anyone who knows anything about where babies come from would know that faking the mother is a lot harder than faking the father.”

Obito walked past the sand trapped boys and got in between the boy and the girl, “Why not say that the father isn’t who you think it is?” The boy had the strangest eyes that Obito had ever seen; white, non pupil eyes. He gritted his teeth. “What are you trying to say, Sunan?” The boy was taller than Obito. Sand came and wrapped itself around the boy’s neck, which caused him to take a quick intake of breath.

“I’m telling you to shut your mouth before I do it for you.” He sneered. Dan’s face, the faces of all the teachers at the academy, and the civilians at the market who had ever *whispered* anything against him and his mother flashed in his mind. He knew how it felt to have people tell him that he didn’t belong. As he watched his sand slowly go up the boys neck to sit right outside his mouth, the boy started to twitch. “If I ever *hear* you say anything disrespectful to this girl again,” he took a step closer to the boy, “you will be shitting sand for the rest of your life.” The boy blinked and Obito released the sand. The boys dropped to their knees and the sand quickly receded back into the gourd. Obito grabbed the shocked girl's wrist and dragged her out of the woods, back to the village and away from the boys.

It wasn’t until then that Obito realized she had the bluest eyes he’d ever seen.

III

Obito made his way back to the bench where he left the girl. She was still staring at her feet. Her hair pooled around her, her hands gripping the seat. “Here.” Obito said, holding out an ice cream cone to her. “I didn’t know what you liked, but I figured chocolate would be okay.” He looked at his other hand. “Unless you want strawberry?” He hoped she didn't.

Her blue eyes filled with light as she took the chocolate one from him.

“Thank you.” She mumbled, face turning as red as her hair.

Obito took a seat next to her, flipping his hood down as he leaned his head back and shook. Her eyes widened even more as sand fell from his hair. “How-” She paused, looking down at her ice cream before her eyes peaked up at him, “How did you get sand in your hair? Your hood was up the whole time.”

Obito shrugged, biting into his strawberry ice cream. “It happens.” They sat in silence for a moment. Obito bit his lip. “I am a magnet for sand.” He grinned, “My mom used to hose me off in the backyard before she let me in the house after training.”

The silence seemed to be a little less awkward after that.

“Thanks for saving me.” She said quietly. “No one’s done that for me before.”

“I know how it feels, it wasn’t a big deal.” Obito smiled, thinking back to when Mako punched Dan in the face. “Sometimes we all need to be saved.”

“Well, I want to be able to stand up for myself!” She gritted her teeth, throwing a fist in the air. Obito looked leeringly at her. He had gotten the impression she was timid and shy, but it was like a switch “I want to be able to push their faces into the dirt and make them beg for mercy!” He scooted away from her. She grinned, “but that can’t happen until I’m made a genin!”

“Why?”

Her grin faltered, “You know…I don’t know…to prove I can do it...I guess...”

Obito rolled his eyes, “You should do that without becoming a genin. You have to be able to stand up for yourself before you can stand up for your country. Or...whatever.” Obito said softly before taking another bite out of his ice cream.

She smiled, “I like that. Stand up for yourself before you're county! So wise!” She crunched loudly on the cone.

“So…you’re the Hokage’s daughter?”

She nodded, “Yup!” Her eyes narrowed, “And I am a legitimate child!” She poked him in the shoulder.

“I never said you weren’t!” He scooted further out of her range.

“Daddy says that when I was born he and mommy were confused with my red hair.” She kicked her feet, “Tsunade-sama was there when I was born and said my daddy's mom had red hair.”

Obito nodded, “I understand that, make comments about my mom all the time.” he thought of Dan, “that I'm a bastard.” He glanced at her, “I'm not a bastard.” He said, his ears warming.

He actually wasn't sure what a bastard was. Just that it was bad.

She shrugged. “Who *is* your father? Is your dad Kakashi-jii?”

Obito stopped, ice cream falling to the ground. He looked over to her. He quickly pulled his hood over his head. Obito pulled his hood tight around his head, hand quickly covering her mouth.

He scowled how bright her eyes looked

“Who told you that!?” He hissed. With his hand over her mouth she couldn’t talk, but she tried anyway.

A hand grabbed him around his neck, lifting him high off the bench. Sand quickly surrounded him and his attacker.

“Stop that.” The deep voice sent a chill down Obito’s spine. Obito’s sand wrapped on the attacker’s wrist. Fingers tightened. He jerked.

“You-bastard!” Obito closed his eyes, gripping the fingers around his neck, focusing his sand. He felt his sand on his skin. He pulled on his attacker's hand, pulling the fingers back.

“Calm down, O-chan”

Obito froze, eyes opening. The grip slackened. He inhaled quickly before coughing.

Mako? “O-chan?” He tried to turn. “What the fuck is O-chan-”

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” the deep voice spoke. He seemed amused.

“His mother would murder him. And you too if you don't let him go.”

“Mako-” Temari’s voice warned. “But maybe if you loosened your grip around his neck, he won't break your wrist.”

His attacker didn’t say anything, but his fingers twitched. Obito focused his grip tighter.

“He wasn't hurting her, let him go.” He heard Shikamaru speak slowly, “Kakashi-sensei, chill out, he's *six.* ”

Kakashi ? Obito lost his grip on his sand and felt himself drop to a pile of sand, becoming completely covered.

The red haired girl giggled. As he focused his sand back in his gourd, he watched a man with silver hair jutting out of his head give the red haired girl a small pat before a few quick hand signs and disappeared in a poof of smoke.

Obito felt his heart drop.

His chance was gone.

III

Obito was grateful for leaving Konoha. He wanted to put as much distance between him and this damn, hot, wet, village as possible and get home to Mom.

He missed her.

Not to mention the horrible first encounter with Hatake Kakashi. He didn't think it would go exactly how he imagined, but not *like that* .

“O-chan!” A small voice called out as they were at the gates. He ignored his snickering teammates and turned to see the red haired Hokage’s daughter running towards him. She held a strawberry ice cream that was melting down her hand. “You-you lost your ice cream when Kakashi-jii”

“It’s not a big deal.” He said shortly, but his heart expanded looking down at the ice cream.

She smiled widely at him, holding out the ice cream. “I wanted to get you another before you left!” He couldn’t help but smile back at her. “And to say thanks again!”

He took it tentatively, “Thanks…uh…”

She shoved him lightly, “Mina!”

He smiled, “Thank you Mina-chan.” He said softly. “I'm Obito. *Not* O-chan.” He glared at Mako, who only shrugged.

“Next time you meet me, I’ll be stronger and stand up for myself! And then we can be ninjas together!”

He looked awkwardly at the ice cream in his hand before looking at her, “Ok.”

She grinned before running back in the village.

He looked down at his ice cream before looking back to his team. “Well, that was strange.” He pulled down his mask and started licking the ice cream off his hands.

Mako clucked her tongue. “Two days here and you already got yourself a girlfriend?” Mako asked bluntly. “You work fast.” Hachiko giggled and Temari snorted.

“Shut up!” He said hands twitching to pull up his mask but took a bite out of his ice cream instead.

Obito Around Town

Chapter Summary

Nine

Shikamaru hadn't been completely honest with Temari when he told her bringing Sakura's kid to Konoha would be troublesome.

It would be a disaster.

“You gonna make your move or what?” The said kid sat cross-legged on his floor across from the shogi board. He looked agitated. His bright green eyes that looked just like his mothers weirded Shikamaru out.

And that was the problem; Shikamaru could see the kid walking down the street and bump into Sasuke. Sasuke would see those green eyes and *know* who that kid was. How would anyone not know?

And it didn't matter how skilled Temari thought the boy was. He was *nine* . He would never have enough experience to defend against Sasuke.

“Well?”

Shikamaru gritted his teeth. “Hold on,”

Shikamaru also ran the simulation of the boy running into Kakashi-sensei. That would probably be an even bigger disaster. Even without knowing what Kakashi-sensei’s face looked like, he knew he was a spitting image of him.

And finding out, years after the fact that you have a kid? And no one told you? There was no way Kakashi-sensei knew. He wouldn’t have, at the very least, asked to be the liaison between here and Suna.

Unless he knows and doesn’t want anything to do with him .

“Make your move!”

Shikamaru looked pointedly up at the boy.

No way, Kakashi-sensei would be like that.

Shikamaru sighed painfully. This was far beyond troublesome.

“Troublesome women,” Before the boy could yell again, he made his move.

“Game.” He said bored. “I’m going to go smoke.” Not only were women troublesome, but *she* wouldn’t even let him smoke in his own house when they were around.

Shikamaru yawned, standing up. He glanced down as the boy studied the board. His lower lip was jutting out as his eyes inspected the board.

Shikamaru frowned. *He’s pretty cute. He certainly didn't get that pout from his mother.*

Thinking of Sakura Haruno always made his stomach churn. If anyone (like Sakura) found out how much he knew, Asuma-sensei better make him some room wherever he ended up. He shook his head, clearing his head. The boy was already arranging pieces on the board. “We'll play again when you get back.”

“I do have work to do.” Shikamaru looked out the window.

“If it was really important, you'd be doing it.” The boy was reaching across the board, placing the pieces back to their starting places. “Or Temari-sensei would be nagging you.”

Shikamaru smirked. He had a point. And this also kept the boy inside, away from potential red, spinning eyes.

The boy sat back down, propping his face on his hands, staring at the board. “I'm going to beat you this time.” Shikamaru smiled. The kid hadn't beat him yet, but he was getting close. Shikamaru hadn't had a good Shougi partner in years.

III

Ino was arranging flowers when the bell chimed. She looked up, frowning when she didn't see anyone.

“Hello?” Ino started when she saw fingers claw at the counter before a small ninja pulled themself up, resting on his elbows. She could hear their feet hitting the middle of the wooden counter. “Hello!” They wore a black tank top with a big hood, obscuring half their face. She saw the small glint of a Suna headband peeking out from behind the

folds of fabric. Their sunglasses were almost bigger than their face. Ino smiled brightly. “You must be the new little member of Temari-san's team?” They pouted. Ino wanted to pinch their cheeks.

“I'm young, not small.”

A boy. Her smile softened. “How old are you?”

He straightened as much as he could. “Almost nine.”

She tsked him. “If you’re almost nine, then you're still pretty small.”

His pout deepened. “My mom said boys grow slower at first than girls. It's why the girls on my team are so much taller than me.”

“How old are they?”

“Thirteen and Fourteen.” Ino leaned back. She tried to take him as seriously as he was trying to sound, but his high, soft voice made it impossible. He's so cute. “You all getting ready for the Chuunin exams?”

He looked down at himself, one hand coming off the counter and into his pocket. “That's classified information ma'am.”

“I was just ask-”

“I'm not here to be interrogated by some flower lady.” He scoffed. Ino's smile fell into a scowl. “Shikamaru-sensei told me I can buy flowers here.”

Shikamaru-sensei? Shikamaru didn’t have any students. The boy pulled out some money, settling back down on his elbows. “It's her birthday.”

“Your girlfr-”

“My mother's!” He yelled, face reddening quickly. “Sorry.”

It seemed like a sensitive subject. She leaned against the counter, “Your mother, of course. How foolish of me.” She straightened, going into business mode. “What kind of flowers does your mom like?”

He shrugged. “We live in the desert. We had a cactus once.”

Ino put her hand on her hips. “Cactus is not a flower.”

The boy leaned in. “It had a flower on it.”

“Mothers don't want cactus for their birthday. She shook her head, moving around the counter. “You want real flowers.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

She rolled her eyes. Her eyes scanned the bright colors in the shop. “Something that doesn't need a lot of water...” She said to herself more to herself than him. “And something that will survive the trip...”

“How about those?” She jumped, spinning around. She hadn't heard the boy jump from the counter, or follow her around the shop. He was pointing at roses.

She shook her head “You're giving it to your mom for her birthday, not a date. Roses are the flower of love. Of romance.”

“Ppfft.” The boy shoved his hands in his pockets. Ino smiled.

“Well...” Ino strolled across the open room. “Daffodils are pretty resilient...”

“What are these?” The boy pointed to a branch of light pink flowers.

Ino smiles sadly, a lump forming in her throat. “It's Cherry blossoms.”

“I thought cherry blossoms came off a tree, not a flower.”

“In the spring the tree blooms and petals scatter everywhere. We all picnic under the trees and admire their beauty.” Ino forced a tear back. It didn't matter how busy their lives had become, she and Sakura had always watched the cherry blossoms bloom together. Up until she left. Now she could barely stand to look at the pink blossoms.

The boy looked her way before looking back at them. “I think my mother would like these the best.” He nodded. He looked back at her. “Do...do they grow in other regions?” He asked slowly.

She nodded, pushing thoughts of her old friend to the back of her mind. “Yes. Though probably not in Suna. They need too much water.”

The boy nodded. “As long as they last a few weeks. She'll probably end up killing them by accident anyways.”

Ino forced a smile. “Oh, yeah?” She plucked a few branches from their perch on a higher self, carrying them gingerly to the counter. The boy

was at her heels. She pulled a small vase from behind the counter, setting the branches in it. “I'll get you some other things to put with them.” She picked some smaller, lighter colored flowers that would bring out the pink blossoms. She picked out some green foliage. She paused, picking up leaves that were the same color as Sakura’s eyes.

Sakura…I hope you’re happy… She smiled sadly as she brought the plants back to the counter. She hadn’t heard from her friend, but she’d heard the whispers.

If half of them true and to pick apart the half truths of the half truths, then she knew she was alive, hidden, but safe.

That’s all she could hope for.

The boy clung to the counter. Ino could see from this side of the counter the boy had his feet secured to the side with chakra.

“You're quite advanced to do that.”

“These flowers smell weird,” The boy ignored her, studying the vase. “But the colors are pretty.”

Ino rounded the corner. “Well, they are popular with-” Her voice tapered off. The boy had removed his glasses and green piercing eyes, the same green as the leaves in her hand, stared at the pink blossoms.

“The pink is like my mom's hair.” He looked up to her and grinned.

Suddenly, something clicked in Ino's mind.“Oh my gods,” She lunged forward. The boy yelped, but Ino grabbed him by the chin. He tried to get away, but she held him firm. *His eyes...*

Everything fell into place. Everything made sense.

“Oh my gods, Sakura, what did you do?” She whispered.

The boy's eyes widened in fright.

III

Shikamaru thought twice about opening the door. The loud, almost cracking knocks warned him who was there. He sighed. He knew this was going to happen. It was his idea after all.

“Hold on, Ino.”

Ino didn’t hold on as the door cracked opened and a red faced Ino crashed through once the locked door. Her eyes were redder than her face.

Shikamaru stumbled back as her eyes narrowed on him. She cornered him against the wall, her forearm pressed hard against his windpipe. “Why?” Tears were flowing down her cheek. If there were two things Shikamaru couldn't take were women and women crying. She pressed against his neck harder. “Why!?”

“Why what?” Shikamaru wheezed. “Why didn't I tell you or why did I send him to your shop?” He didn't fight it, he did deserve it. A little.

“Why?” She released him, stepping away. He frowned holding his neck. He coughed. Ino wrapped her arms around herself. “How long?” He sidestepped, putting enough distance between them before he answered cautiously.

“Two days after she left.” Instead of attacking again, Ino laughed. A defeated laugh. A laugh he most likely had for years after Asuma died.

“Of course you did.”

Shikamaru cringed. He would rather deal with enraged Ino than dejected Ino. “I didn't tell anyone because I didn't want it to somehow get out where she was.” He swallowed, wincing. He took a few steps forward. “But it’s March. And you’re always so damn sad it’s annoying.” She huffed. He grabbed her arm. “You know, but you also knows you need to keep your mouth shut.” He said seriously.

Ino slumped against the wall, her breaths shaky as she sniffed loudly. But Ino nodded. Shikamaru sighed in relief. He let her go. “She...deserved some peace. After everything that she's been through,”

They were quiet for a moment. “Did you talk to him? Obito?”

She wiped her eyes. “Yeah.” She nodded, her arms falling to her sides a little harder than she probably meant to. “She works at the hospital in Suna. She's fine. Happy.”

“Figures.”

Ino looked at him quizzically. “You go to Suna. On a fairly regular basis.”

He held up his hands. “I didn't want to know anymore than I needed

to. Never looked for her, never asked any questions." He sighed. "I kept my head down and so does everyone else there. No one in the village says anything to me because they don't want Sasuke coming back and causing trouble again."

"He told me who his father is." Ino frowned. "Not like he really needed to once I really looked at him." Ino looked at him, tears welling up in her eyes. "I never would have guessed." She gave Shikamaru a side-long glance. "It makes sense now. All of it." Her hands rose and fell, knocking against the wall again.

Shikamaru pulled out a cigarette. "So, what are you going to do?" Shikamaru was an excellent strategist, but even he couldn't figure out what Ino would do with this information. He lit the cigarette.

She was looking at the ceiling. "I don't know."

"I'd leave it alone." Shikamaru inhaled deeply. He knew she was a mess by her not nagging the smoke. "She'll come back. I've been telling you that for years. Knowing what I do doesn't change that." He inhaled deeply, relaxing as the smoke whirled in his lungs. He exhaled slowly. "Maybe not for good, but she'll eventually show up."

She frowned. "Can you be so sure?" She wasn't looking at him.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Kids team is up for the Chuunin exams, she's bound to come. To watch. Which I have a feeling isn't a coincidence."

Ino shrugged. "That doesn't mean she's coming back. It's a big risk to come to Konoha."

"Yeah, but it's her kid." Shikamaru sighed. "People will do stupid things for their kids."

Ino nodded, looking back up at him, "You really think she'll come?"

"For my sake I hope so. You'll nag me until the end of time if she doesn't."

Ino punched him in the arm. He groaned louder than necessary.

III

"How did you get these back to Suna?"

"Very carefully." Obito said, flushing from his neck to his ears. "We took turns holding them. Luckily we didn't run into any trouble on the

way back.”

She looked down at the vase of colorful flowers. It even had some branches of cherry blossoms. She hadn’t seen cherry blossoms in almost ten years.

“Happy birthday, Mom.” He looked down sheepishly.

She gathered him, and his flowers, into her arms, hugging him tightly. “Thanks, Obi-chan.”

Soon he'd hate when she called him Obi-chan. But now it didn't phase him as his face lit up like the morning sun on the sand. “Do you like them! The lady at the flower shop helped put it together!” His smile faltered-he always got nervous with gifts. He was like his father in more ways than his hair.

Sakura could remember the first time Kakashi got her anything. It was a bento box. He looked almost bored as he handed it over to her after a morning training session, but his fingers shook slightly as they brushed against hers.

She pulled him into a hug. “They're perfect, Obito.” She released him and walked the vase through the house, placing them carefully on one of the window sills in the living room. “Plenty of sunlight.”

Obito dug into his pockets. “She said to give you these. Plant food or something.” He held out some small packets.

A lump formed in her throat. “Thank you.” Her voice hitched slightly.

He paused. “Mom?” Uncertainty laced his voice.

She shook her head, “I'm fine. It's just...flowers always remind me of a friend I dearly, dearly miss.” She looked down to see guilt written all over his face.

She quickly bent pulled him tight again. “Did I ever tell you about her? Ino?” He shook his head. She pulled back. “All my stories have revolved around your father, but I feel like I've left out one of the most important people, haven't I?” She wiped away her own tears. “Come on, I'll make lunch and tell you about my own Chuunin exam. About my fight with my best friend.” Warm memories filled her as she stood up and grabbed the boy's hand.

I wonder if you're alright Ino.

She squeezed his hand. He sheepishly looked up at her.

I'll make it up to you. I promise.

III

There was something going on in his village, Naruto was certain.

Naruto looked at his wife, who was patting her large stomach fondly as she fed their soon-to-be oldest son Kenta. It was an image that Naruto never got tired of.

“Mina should be home.” He crossed his arms, peering out the window of their home.

Hinata shrugged. “I think she had a playdate with that boy from Suna.” Hinata smiled knowingly at Naruto.

The Hokage frowned. “Who is this kid anyways?” He scoffed. “I don't like him.”

“Please don't start a war with Suna because your daughter has a 'little friend.'”

“Hmph...little friend my ass.” He stood straighter as he caught a glimpse of red hair walking with a shady looking punk. The brat had dark sunglasses and a darker hood and mask as if he was trying to be cool. He was walking too close to Mina. He had his hand near her back as she almost stumbled.

She looked up smiling, and that's when he saw it.

A large bruise on her face.

Anger flared in Naruto. He was about to storm out there when Hinata spoke. “No.”

Naruto looked over to her; She didn't stop feeding their son. “Leave them. She's ten, not fifteen.”

He looked back out the window. The boy had stopped, looking at the house skeptically. From this close, Naruto couldn't make out the boy's facial features at all. He must have said something, because Mina turned back towards the house, glaring at the window. Naruto took a step back.

Hinata sighed. “Leave them be.”

Naruto looked back at the window before moving farther into the house. “Has she talked to you about him?”

“Besides that he's from Suna, his name is Obito and he's super cool?” She gave him a look, “no.” She wiped a bit of food from their son's mouth. “She's only ten. Let her have her little friends.”

Naruto scoffed. “Little is right.”

“And stop bothering Kakashi-senpai with these tailing missions.”

Naruto pouted. “I doubt he takes them as seriously as he should.” Kakashi-sensei was the only one that the boy couldn't spot.

“I doubt he actually does them.” Naruto shot his wife a glare.

“I pay him for those!”

Hinata shook her head.

Naruto huffed, “you need to take the safety of our daughter more seriously.” He snipped as the door slammed shut.

“You!” Naruto jumped. He turned to see Mina’s face as red as her hair. Even her blue eyes held a fire he'd never seen before. She marched up to him and puffed out her cheeks. “Stop spying on me!” She poked him in the stomach before putting her hands on her hips. She let out a hug pitched whine before storming to her room.

Naruto watched her retreat, speechless. “What?!”

Hinata laughed, scooping up Kenta. “She's only ten and she knows how to stop the Great Uzumaki Naruto in his traps.” He pouted as Hinata patted him sympathetically. “Leave her be until she turns fifteen. Then start worrying.”

Naruto grumbled. “Fifteen? Try twelve.”

Hinata gave him another pat.

III

Kakashi dropped his bag at the door with a heavy sigh. He'd made it back. Somehow.

Heavy legs carried him to the bathroom where he stripped and bathed. He brushed his teeth, turning the light off with a small click.

His stomach grumbled, but he ignored it, heading towards the bedroom. He walked through the dark, collapsing on the bed with a heavy sigh.

It had been a long mission. Three months traveling through Earth country. It would have been a month, but on the way back home he couldn't help himself; he stopped in every village looking for her.

It's why he took such long missions to far away places.

He prayed that wherever she was, she stayed put Even if it was just so he could find her. Even before he left for Earth, he knew she wasn't there. Despite it, he checked.

And checked.

And check over and over again.

He felt she'd just disappeared off this planet.

He sighed, looking over to his bedside. There were three pictures. One of his original team, Team Minato. One of Team Kakashi (including Tenzo) and then of them.

It was a few months before Sasuke. She looked so happy. He had hoped she was happy. With him. With *them* .

Kakashi took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and saw her face. He wondered what she was up to. If she'd let her hair grow long again. Did she have someone new in her life? Kakashi tried not to think about that. He always thought of her happiness first. If he ever saw her again with a man and small family, he wouldn't bother them. He just wanted to see her, even if it was one last time.

He turned away from the picture. “Fucking Sasuke,” he murmured.

This was all his fault.

Kakashi sighed again. There was no point in moping. Kakashi just had to keep on going. He peeked at the clock on the nightstand. In three hours he was supposed to start tailing Mina-chan and the kid from Suna. He yawned, plucking the picture of Sakura and himself from the table. He looked at it for a while before sighing. “At least I get a paid day off.” He closed his eyes, letting dreamless sleep take over.

Welcome Back

Sakura couldn't believe it; her little Obito had grown up.

When she was nine she was still in the academy, studying hard, hoping to get a certain boy's affection. She never even thought about the chuunin exams. If she was honest with herself, she probably didn't know what the chuunin exam was.

When Obito had told her he was going to sit for the exam, she instantly disapproved. She knew how Itachi and Kakashi were isolated from others. It took years for Kakashi to finally make connections with his team and others his age.

She looked over to Obito walking with his team towards Konoha (another statement she never thought she'd think). He was talking animatedly with Mako and Hachiko. Sakura watched the three of them with their heads together whispering frantically. Hachiko's hands shot out, emphasizing something before they all looked up to her before bringing their heads together again. Sakura looked away, smiling brightly.

Despite her worries, she knew he was right where he needed to be.

"This will be your first time home?"

Sakura's smile faltered, turning to Temari. She nodded, "Nine years and five months." She looked at Obito, frowning. I can't forget why I'm here. I have to protect him. I have to watch out for Sasuke.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, "If anything happens, you'll both be well protected." She gestured to the small team, "Look at all the new chuunins we're going to have."

"Tsunade did say it was clear..." Sakura recalled the letter from Tsunade and her threats on every other line if she wasn't there with Obito.

"Gaara confirmed Sasuke has been sent on a lengthy mission. He won't see any of the exams."

Nightmares from the past two weeks flashed in her head. Ever since it was "decided " that Obito would participate in the exams, she dreamed of angered Sharingan eyes. They were like spinning flames to

the backdrop of Obito's blood on his katana. Obito's bloodied, limp body in her arms. His green eyes wide, and unfocused.

Lifeless.

"Traitor…"

Temari nudged her, bringing her back to the present. She gave Sakura a comforting smile. "It's going to be alright."

Sakura nodded, giving the other kunoichi a small smile. She shook her head, "How would Gaara know if he'd been sent on a mission?"

"You know how he and Uzumaki are best friends. They talk a lot. Sending letters and such."

Sakura looked over to the Kazekage who was in deep conversation with his elder brother. "But you told me that no one would know we were coming!" Fear bubbled in Sakura. She looked around. "Why would he ask that if-"

She felt sand wrap around her waist lightly. "You're not the only one that doesn't want to see Uchiha Sasuke." Sakura didn't have to look down at Obito anymore. "Gaara didn't want to see him either," Obito's not-so-small hands felt secure on her arm. "No one from Suna was coming if he was here."

"Gaara!" Sakura froze. Her heart clenched and her eyes watered at the voice. It was just as loud, still full of life and innocence that a man with his past shouldn't have. Sakura slowly turned as the Hokage's laugh filled the path.

He was taller, his hair a bit shaggier, but his blue eyes were as bright as ever. Instead of the traditional Hokage garb he wore something similar to his Sage robes; a long open breasted, calf length black jacket with orange and red flames rising up from the hem. The sleeves had been rolled back to the upper forearms, revealing his old black and orange jumpsuit. "We were afraid you were going to be late!"

Sakura felt Obito's grip on her arm tighten as he ducked behind her. She put a hand on his shoulder, moving it back to his neck, gripping the hood on his shirt before pulling it sharply over his head.

The Hokage wrapped the Kazekage tightly in a big hug. Sakura almost missed it as Obito shoved her cloak hood over her head as well.

“It's so good to see-” Naruto stopped, his eyes roaming over the crowd. His blue eyes stopped on her.

Time stopped around them.

The world fell away as tears filled her eyes. Her heart ached as Naruto took a step towards her.

“Sakura?”

And like something snapping in her, Sakura took off, jumping into her friend's open arms.

III

Obito felt naked, vulnerable. Like he was an animal for sale. He stood in the Hokage’s office as the Hokage walked in circles around him, gawking. He was stripped to his tank top and shorts. His hood was down, his silver and pink locks bare for the world, or at the least the Hokage, to see. His mother leaned against the desk, biting her thumb nail on her right hand. She watched the Hokage, who was grinning maniacally.

Obito stiffened when the Hokage started pulling at his hair. When the man went to grab his mask, Obito slapped his hand away. His eyes narrowed, “Off the mask.”

He heard his mom snort. The Hokage rolled his eyes. “It's like-” Obito was glad that his icy stare caused the man to falter. Uzumaki Naruto recovered with a laugh. He turned to his mother. “He’s just like him. A bit more feisty. Just…A smaller version.” Obito’s eyes narrowed as the Hokage walked to his desk and sat in his chair. He leaned back, grinning. “How old are you?”

“Nine, Hokage-sama.” He bowed slightly. He would not start shaking. His mother was here. She'd protect him if the Hokage decided to smash him like a pulp for getting too close to his daughter.

They weren't even that close. But Obito knew even before Mina-chan had told them that they were constantly under surveillance. Obito had scared a few of them off, but now the one that typically tailed them was harder to pinpoint; always just out of reach. Temari-sensei told him to just pretend he didn’t notice. To keep his head down and not attract the wrong kind of attention.

He just wished his sand could find them.

The Hokage whistled, “Impressive. You think you’ll win?”

Obito tilted his head, “Win what sir?”

The Hokage waved his hand , “The chuunin exams.”

Obito looked to his mother with a skeptical look, “You ‘win?’”

“Ignore him,” his mom sighed.

The Hokage shot his mother a look. He stood tall, “Will you succeed and become an honorable chuunin?” The Hokage said in a very professional tone, despite his almost creepy grin.

Obito smirked, one that the Hokage couldn’t see because of his mask. “Of course, Hokage-sama.”

“He’s been ready for over a year.” Obito flushed at his mom's praise. Her face seemed to glow for the first time they entered the Fire country.

The Hokage laughed, “Been waiting for Konoha, eh.”

Obito wished he would shut the hell up. “No, I was waiting for the Kazekage’s approval. I would have ‘won’ last year in Earth, but Gaara-sama believed that I wouldn’t perform well enough to pass.” He said offhandedly.

“Cocky aren’t we?” The Hokage laughed.

“Naruto!”

The Hokage jumped to his feet, crossing the room and circling him again, “How are you liking your first trip to Konoha?”

Obito tensed, heart hammering, but didn’t show it otherwise. “I am sure to enjoy it, sir. From what I've seen from the entrance to your office, you have a fine village.”

“And an even finer Ramen shop! We should go!”

“Naruto,” His mother's voice sounded like it did when he tracked sand through the house.

The Hokage grinned sheepishly at her. “So you think you’re ready?”

Obito felt his heart leap as he nodded his head. “I know I am.”

The Hokage gave a fox-like grin as he moved to his desk and leaned against it. “I like you.”

You really don't.

“So, Gaara’s your teacher?” He looked over to his mom and pointed at himself, “Should I take on an apprentice? Gaara has one. And you were one for Tsunade-baa-chan.”

Obito noticed how his mother seemed to relax more as she rolled her eyes. “I was also trained under Temari-sensei and Kankuro-sensei, and my mother.”

He perked up at this. “In medicine?”

“Chakra control sir.”

“Hmm.” Naruto’s eyes shifted from him to his mother. “You know he’s not here, right?” Naruto said quietly, filling the room with tension quickly.

Obito's heart sank. He was hoping Kakashi might be here to see the exams. Obito took a shaky breath before asking as innocently as he could “Who, Hokage-sama?”

The Hokage ignored him, looking at his mother. “They both left on a month-long mission two weeks ago. They might come home a little early, but not in time for the chuunin exams.

“Sasuke can’t leave the village without supervision and…they were both best suited for this mission. If you would have told me you were coming…” He shrugged.

His mother looked down at her hands.

The Hokage sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I can't call Kakashi-sensei back without Sasuke. And I told Gaara I'd keep Sasuke out of the village.” He shook his head, “Politically, my hands are tied.”

“Good.” She whispered. “I don’t want either of them to know I’m here.” Obito gaped as his mom’s eyes flickered to him, “that *we’re* here.”

Anger filled Obito. *Good?!* A lump formed in his throat. He looked down at his feet. *How is this good?* Obito clenched his teeth and

blinked back tears.

The Hokage seemed at a loss for words as well. After a moment he cleared his throat.

“With that being said, you can't expect me to hide you from those within the village.” His mother looked away. “I might be Hokage, but Ino would kill me if she ever heard you were here and I knew and didn't tell her.

Obito and the Hokage’s eyes met. The Hokage frowned, “Gaara also took a big risk bringing you here.” He said softly. “You’re not a missing nin, but you’re as close as it gets. Technically I’m supposed to report you to the council and the elders.”

“ *What* !?” Fear ripped through Obito as he looked from the Hokage to his mother. Her face had gone ashen, her hand coming up to her face.

The Hokage waved it off, “Ah, Sakura-chan, you think I’m going to do that to you? After I just got you back?!” His face morphed into something unreadable. “Stick close to Gaara. Keep your hood up and out of sight as much as you can. “And go and see Ino before figures it out and blabs to everyone.

“I’ll have Hinata tell the others. She’s more discrete than I could ever be.” The Hokage pointed a finger at Obito, “And when he’s not-” he made hand gestures, “During the exams, I expect you to be here, with me.” He beamed, “I haven’t seen you in so long and after you leave, I don’t know when I’ll get to see you again.” He shrugged, “I don’t get to leave the village much these-”

His mother crossed the room and pulled Uzumaki Naruto into a fierce embrace. “I’m sorry.” She whispered.

The Hokage’s eyes widened before he wrapped his arms around her. Obito looked away; he’d never seen his mother hug anyone but him. And Baa-chan.

He’d also never heard her cry before.

III

When his mother left, the Hokage took him out to get something to eat.

Obito shouldn’t be surprised that he took them to the ramen stand. It

was surreal, sitting at the small bar as the Hokage talked openly with the woman behind the counter, laughing loudly as if nothing was wrong.

Like his mother was walking around *Konoha* , her once home, fearing for her life. Or that, once again, Kakashi wasn't here for him to meet. Obito held the bottom of his hood close to his chin. His heart was beating loudly in his chest. From all his time in Konoha, he had never heard that his mom wasn't supposed to be here. He had known she'd run to Suna, that Gaara and the desert were protecting them, but not to where something could happen to them if they were ever found out.

He glanced up at the Hokage as he waved goodbye to the woman behind the counter as she went into the back. The Hokage's smile fell. Tension grew as the silence became deafening between them. Then the woman came back with their food. The Hokage didn't touch it. Obito tenderly pulled the mask down, before gingerly picking up his chopsticks. He ate slowly.

After a few minutes, the Hokage spoke. "So...what's with the mask?" Obito looked up, mouth half full of noodles as he watched the older man, one arm propped up on the bar, looking straight into Obito's soul.

"Ur ramon it gittn cauld." Obito spoke before swallowing. The Hokage simply stared, blue eyes piercing. They sat like that for a few moments before Obito swallowed, slowly putting his chopsticks over his half empty bowl. He closed his eyes. "When learning to manipulate sand, I would swallow a lot of it. Or breathe it in. It was Kankuro-sensei's idea. Mom didn't seem to like it at first." He peaked his eyes open. "But when I stopped coughing up sand, she grew to appreciate it." The Hokage was still staring at him.

Obito couldn't help but notice that Mina had his eyes.

He shrugged nonchalantly, feeling his ears burn. *Not sure why I thought that just now.* "But she got used to it. I almost always wear it at home; manipulating the sand all the time is good training, but exhausting. But it's difficult here," he forced a smile, "Your air is so wet." He played with the mask around his neck before picking his chopsticks up and continuing to eat.

The Hokage was frowning, "You look like your father with it on." He spun the noodles in his bowl, "Maybe without it on, but we've never

seen him without his mask." He grabbed a chopstick full of noodles and took a big bite. "Does she talk about him?"

Obito scrunched his face, "On...occasion. And only bits and pieces. Not…not much. Things he would say or do." Obito smiled sadly, "We were on a 'special' mission here about a year ago and due to rain we were held up for an extra day. When I got home, I tried making up some terrible excuse…and she started crying." He took another bite of his ramen. "Apparently that was not the thing to do."

Naruto nodded, finally turning away from the boy. "He was always late, always saying something about saving cats in trees, or helping little old ladies."

Obito looked back at his ramen, "Well, it wasn't that bad, but it was pretty bad."

"What did you say?"

Obito smirked, "I said a princess came into our hotel room, begging us to help the poor damsel in distress because her dog had run away. And we spent half the day looking for it until Temari-sensei demolished all the trees in the area, finding the dog peeing on a special cherry blossom tree the owners of the hotel we were staying at planted and-"

The Hokage laughed, stopping him, "I get it, I get it."

His laughter died down and the silence that filled the small space was much more tolerable.

But something itched in the back of Obito's mind. He looked up to the Hokage. "What…what was he to you guys? I mean, he wasn't some guy off the street. Mom has told me stories about how you all were on missions together, but…he-"

The Hokage raised a brow. "He...was our Sensei." He spoke slowly. He finished off his bowl, looking at the woman behind the bar who had another one waiting. "Me, Sakura, and Sasuke graduated from the academy together, and he became our teacher. A few years later, Sasuke ran off, trying to get vengeance for his fallen clan. I went off with Jiraiya, one of the sannin, and Sakura stayed here with Tsunade.

"Time passed.

"I don't know all the details either, but apparently they had been…

together…for a few years when I brought Sasuke back. And Sasuke was only able to come back to the village if he let the village help him rebuild his clan."

"How?"

"They were able to pick his wife. And not surprisingly, they picked your mother." He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. "We all had a feeling that Sakura was going to get picked."

"What about my father?"

"No one knew she was dating him, not even her friends. I doubt it would have mattered, but maybe it would have. We'll never know." The Hokage's eyes glistened, "I have a feeling that if it was public knowledge, things might have turned out only slightly different." He looked at Obito seriously, "You might not have been born for starters." Obito's heart pulsed in his ears. "Sasuke always thought Sakura was doing something she shouldn't have been doing, which" he winced, "I guess she was," he frowned, "but they weren't married yet, so if it was wrong-" The Hokage shook his head, "Sasuke never thought it was Kakashi-sensei." Naruto snorted, "Before she left, Kakashi-sensei was living with her and Sasuke thought she was waiting until Kakashi-sensei left to go on a mission or Kakashi-sensei was covering for her. Not-" The Hokage paused, his ears going pink.

He ate his ramen.

Obito looked down at his bowl. He'd heard a lot of stories about his parents, but never that.

The Hokage finished off his bowl, "I'm guessing Baa-chan helped her leave." He looked into his steaming bowl. "I didn't do anything, because…well, I brought Sasuke back. It was my fault she was in this situation." He shrugged, "And after…" He sighed, "I always thought Sakura was better off somewhere else." He shook his head, looking at Obito and grinning, "But if I would have known about *you* , things might have been a little different."

Obito looked down into his bowl. The noodles looked soggy and disgusting now. "I always figured I was a mistake."

That wasn't true. He *knew* he was a mistake. And though the desert protected them, it didn't protect them from the words of the villagers. *I'm not a kid anymore, I know what a bastard is.*

Naruto nudged him. “Don't think about it like that. Your mother loves you very much. That’s why she left. She had to protect you. Your mother was screwed over basically. Sasuke…he still wants to go out looking for her. To bring her back and make her pay for betraying him…Ironic if anything…” He murmured.

“He betrayed us. Left the village to find revenge. And then he betrayed us again when he came back.

“Betrayed our trust. Our love for him. If Sakura had any love in her heart left for him, anyway.”

Obito was silent, his mind whirling.

He watched the Hokage pay for their meal. “You said Sasuke still wants to find my mother. Does-Does Kakashi-does he-does he look for her?”

The Hokage reached out and ruffled his hood, almost knocking it off. “Of course! He acts like he doesn't, but he does. His extra long missions aren't just so he can take in the scenery of the world.” The Hokage paused, “though I know he's been to Suna a handful of times…”

Obito's heart dropped to his stomach. “Our house had been concealed with a genjutsu until my teammates blew up the cactus in the front yard.”

The Hokage blinked at him before exploding into laughter. Obito pulled on his hood as people from outside the stand stopped and stared.

Obito looked down at his feet. He felt a nudge.

The Hokage’s eyes were bright and full of laughter, “don't worry, kid. We'll figure something out.” The Hokage winked.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.”

“Ah! Don't do that!” he slapped Obito in the back, almost knocking him off his chair. “Call me Naruto!” He laughed. “Or Naruto-jii! I always thought Sakura-chan’s kid would call me Naruto-jii!”

Obito rolled his eyes as he watched 'Naruto-jii' picked himself up and held the flap of the small stand open for him, “Now! Let me show you the sites of Konoha! It’s a special treat for the Hokage himself to-”

Obito stopped, frowning. Naruto-jii tilted his head. Obito frowned, “you know I’ve been here before, right?”

Naruto blanched, “You have?”

Obito blinked. He looked around the somewhat familiar streets. He pointed at himself, “I’m-I’m Mina-chan’s friend.

“The one from Suna.” Naruto-jii’s face paled, “I’ve met Hinata-san a bunch of times.” Obito swallowed, “I thought you were playing along with the whole ‘first time in Konoha’ bit. If Mom found out I was here, we’d all be in a *lot* of trouble-”

Naruto-jii’s face darkened. Obito took a step back.

This was the Hokage he had been expecting when he first stepped into his office.

And in a flash, it was gone. He was smiling brightly as he leaned down and clasped Obito on the shoulder. Naruto-jii’s voice had a sharp edge, making Obito jump. “Just remember when you are in *my* village, your mother can't save you. Since you aren’t supposed to be here.

“Remember that.” Obito nodded stupidly. “We don't want to have a war over you 'disrespecting' my Mina-chan.”

Obito felt a cold chill ride down his spine, but he kept his composure. “I don't even know what that means, sir. How would I-”

He was smacked on the back again, harder than necessary. “Give it a few years.” The Hokage growled before leading towards the flower shop.

Naruto and Sakura

So much has changed, and yet, stayed the same.

She tried to stay away from familiar haunts-the neighborhood that her old apartment was in, the hospital, the training grounds. Though when she was least expecting it, she ended up where she last wanted to be.

At Kakashi's front door.

She stood there, staring. It felt like only yesterday when she silently crept through the house to his bedroom.

To his side.

Even when he was away on missions, he wasn't one to lock his doors. Though he'd never say it outloud, he loved it when he came home after a mission with her in his bed. Even though she knew he wasn't there, she was almost tempted to try; to see if he finally started locking it. In her dreams, his home was always locked.

Trying would make this all too real. Being back.

But not being home.

She watched the door handle, her hands clenching. It wouldn't be hard to just reach out and grab it. But as much as she wanted to, her hands just couldn't touch the knob.

So she left, almost running (she was always running) to the farthest reaches of the city.

To the Hokage Monument.

"I had a feeling I'd find you here." Naruto's voice was full of the same laughter it always held. She exhaled deeply, looking over her shoulder and smiled.

Naruto was wearing his old black and orange jumpsuit. His headband tied around his forehead. For a moment Sakura forgot where she was. When she was. They were young again, it was after training. Naruto hadn't realized Hinata's feelings yet. She smiled as he plopped down beside her, arm crossing behind her back.

She leaned against him.

They sat in silence.

The sun had almost set before Naruto spoke quietly. “I've missed you, ya know.” His voice was deeper than she remembered, pulling her back into the present. She looked down at their legs. Her tan skin a sharp contrast to his.

A lump formed in her throat.

“I’ve missed you too.”

They sat in silence again.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her erratic heartbeat. So many old emotions, old places, old faces-Naruto's smell. It was almost too much.

Naruto hummed, “I have four kids now.”

Sakura couldn't help but smile. “Oh really?”

Naruto leaned his head on hers. “Yup. Mina, Kenta, Ryu and Akira.”

Sakura felt a tear roll down her cheek. “Three boys and your little princess.” She looked up to Naruto who was staring out at his village. “I'm sorry, I missed it all.” Her voice hitched slightly.

Naruto's brow furrowed. “I wish you would have told me. I could have done something.”

No, you couldn’t have. She shook her head, “I'm sorry.”

“Hey!” He elbowed her lightly. “Quit that, 'I'm sorry!' stuff.” His teased voice sounded strained. “What's done is done and we just have to keep going.”

She wiped a tear from her eyes, “yeah.”

They sat in silence for a few more minutes. Eventually Naruto pulled away. “Sakura, between us...do you regret leaving? Or Obito? Or-”

“I regret not telling Kakashi.” She gripped Naruto's pant leg. She took a heavy breath. “I took something precious away from him. I've kept him hidden selfishly. And now,” she took a shaky breath, heaving before collapsing against Naruto. “And now it's too late.”

She felt Naruto's arms wrap around her. She let the walls down and sobbed into his jacket. He whispered nothings into her ear long after the sun went down.

After she calmed down, Naruto pulled against her. “You saved that boy's life, remember that Sakura.” He chided. “If you would have stayed-Sasuke would have killed Obito. Kakashi would have died protecting you both.

“And most importantly.” He shook her slightly. “You did what you thought was best.” He grinned cheekily at her. “It's never too late, Sakura. Remember that. It will happen at the proper moment.”

She wrapped her arms around him once more, squeezing tightly. “Thank you, Naruto.”

He returned the hug, snickering. “It's a shame he's not one of my ninja. Maybe I'll convince him to stay.” Naruto snickered again. “Might not be too hard.”

Sakura frowned, but warmth spread in her chest. “He's nine.”

“I might have my persuasions.” He pulled back, jumping to his feet, leaning down to help her up. “I'm sure our girls are much cuter than the ones in Suna.”

Sakura's eyes widened. “Naruto! Do not start that! He's only nine!”

“And I was in love with you when I was eight!” Naruto put a hand to his chest, the other wrapping around her.

She smacked him lightly. “This is my son.”

“Hey! I have a ten year old daughter!” He looked down at her skeptically. “Already the boys are flocking to her. Walking her home, buying her lunch. Next thing I know my ANBU will find her kissing under a tree.” His voice was no longer carefree. It was a bit dark.

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Don't have your elite ninja tailing your ten year old.”

“I will do what I see fit for the safety of the villagers, no matter how small and adorable!”

They walked in silence until they reached the village. Naruto took a step back, leaving Sakura feeling slightly cold. “You're not-you're not

going to disappear again are you?" Sakura felt tears well in her eyes. "I mean-you're staying in Suna? I can live with that. Knowing where you are-and you're safe."

Sakura nodded. "Suna is my home now. It's my Obito's home." Naruto scooped her into his arms.

"That's all I ask for."

She returned the hug.

The Tasks

“We should head back to that gate thing...” Mako said, dangling from a tree, tossing a handful of rocks at Obito. His sand batted the rocks away without him thinking too hard about it. He ran his hands over the scroll in his hands before shoving it into a pouch at his hip.

“I feel like this should have been more difficult.” He said offhandedly, pulling his white shirt over his head. He had planned on wearing his sand gear the whole time, but it was just too hot. As a gust of stale air hit his skin underneath, he took a sigh of relief.

“We've got time.” Hachiko giggled, joining Mako in rock tossing. It was something they did when they were bored. She made a small 'humph' sound as she threw a rock particularly hard at Obito. His sand barely caught it, spraying grains over his goggles. “This gives us a good time to help Obito train.”

“What about helping me!?”

“You’re a lost cause.”

Mako slid out of the tree. She went to her pack and rummaged through it. “Maybe we should try being defenseless, and someone will come and try to take our scroll! And then we could kick their ass.” She pulled out a familiar black shirt. She winked before tossing it to him.

Obito squawked as his sand tried to bat it away.

“Or they'll kick ours.” Hachiko countered, “you can't just assume that you can kick everyone's ass.”

Mako rolled her eyes. “I could take these guys.” She crossed her arms. “Then that gives us a chance to see what we're up against in the next round.”

“We shouldn’t fight if we don’t have to. Save our strength. Save our element of surprise.” Obito stood. His sand swirled around him before returning to his gourd. He looked at both of them. “Wait until the next round.”

Mako huffed. Hachiko nodded, “Then let’s get a move on.”

III

Obito's competitor was a small girl from grass. Her fighting stances could use a little work, but she smirked like she was a master.

He stood straight. "What's with your smirk?"

She laughed, wiggling her fingers. "I've got this in the bag, short stop!"

"We're the same height-"

The girl advanced.

Obito sighed. He dodged a sloppy round kick, side stepping her before tripping her. As she fell to the ground, he carefully set his gourd down, patting it fondly.

As the girl got to her feet, he maneuvered his sand around it to protect the gourd in case the girl tripped again. As she ducked towards him, he batted her arm out of the way and threw a kick. It connected easily and he jumped back and surveyed the room.

He was curious as to how to end it; he could drag it out until she got tired (that helped him build up stamina) or he could end it with a quick combo using his super strength. As he dodged another sloppy blow, his eyes went around the room. He wasn't sure when his next fight would be, or who it was against. He might want to save his stamina, but then he'd lose the advantage of surprise when it came to his super strength.

She came after him with a fast punch, and he let it through, letting her think she tripped him to drop and do a swift sweep kick, knocking her down.

The girl squawked. Obito lunged, his sand trailing after him.

Obito tried to wrangle the girl quickly, but she *was* a little bigger than him. But not bigger than Mako. As sand rained down on them from above, she lost her grip. Obito use the opening to tackle her, grabbing her arm and twisting it behind her back, locking it in place. She let out an alarmed scream.

"Yield!" He called, pressing his knee into her back. She refused, squirming beneath him. He twisted her arm, slowly building the pressure. "It'll dislocate if you don't tap out." He said calmly.

She didn't for a moment and he twisted again.

With shaky hands she gave up.

III

Sakura's heart hammered in her chest. She gripped her seat to keep her hands from shaking. She was seated in the giant arena for the final task. She remembered sitting here all those years ago and seeing Naruto defeat Neiji. And Sasuke-

Sakura gripped the chair tighter.

Sasuke...

She tried to focus on remembering her own chuunin exams; On her makeshift team of Ino and Chouji for the exams. The pride she felt when, out of character, Tsunade pulled her into a hug after receiving her ranking.

Pride swelled tightly in her chest. She could still feel the coarse material of the flak jacket between her fingers.

There was a sudden hush as contenders entered the arena. One was clad in green spandex and orange leg warmers (a likely new 'beast of Konoha'). Unlike his predecessors, his cropped hair was sandy blond. He did have the cheesy grin and determined eyes.

Sakura's heart stopped as the second figure made it into the area. He was in black pants and a black skin tight tank top with a hood attached. He wore a black mask, leaving only his piercing green eyes visible. He had a bright red strap across his chest, keeping his gourd snug.

Obito's eyes roamed the crowd, no doubt looking for her.

She wanted to call out, to rip her hood down so he could see her pink hair, but she said quietly, shrinking into the seat next to the Kazekage. She willed him to hear her silent cheers.

She wasn't worried about him-he'd do fantastic. Team Temari breezed through the first rounds with ease. They were the first team out of the Forest of Death and finished their preliminary matches with ease. Mako had already gone and completed her final round, showing a side of her that Sakura hadn't seen before. The overly loud, fairly crude girl was cunning in battle, though focused too much on hand to hand combat. They would dock points for her only use of weapons being poor distractions.

Hachiko, on the other hand, showed a keen eye for detail and was able to survey the field much better than Mako. Though she stayed at a distance, she was easily in control the whole time. She was obviously Temari's student when she pulled out a medium size wind fan and sent her opponent from Grass through the wall.

With Mako's close up and Hachiko's long distance that left Obito.

The proctor entered the arena and looked them both over. He held up his hand. He held up a hand in the direction of the green clad boy, “Jiki from Konoha!” He gestured towards Obito, “Obito from Suna!” He raised a hand and threw it between the boys. “Begin!”

She wasn't worried. Why would she be worried? She'd seen him train-trained him herself. There was nothing to worry about.

Except how slack he looked. How relaxed. *He has his hands in his pockets!* As his opponent crouched down, moving around cautiously. Obito's head was tilted slightly to the side.

“What are you doing?” She whispered. His eyes looked bored. There was no sand coming out of his gourd when a sickening realization hit Sakura.

She'd never seen him use his sand.

Could he use it? Was it just there for show. 'Oh look, I'm the Kazekage's apprentice!'

The blond boy raised a brow before shouting. “Come at me!”

Obito's nonchalant shrug sent a cold chill down her back.

She heard Naruto snort a few seats away from her. “Remind you of anyone, Sakura-chan?” He giggled.

Sakura shot him with a dirty scowl. It did.

It reminded her of Kakashi.

“Don’t take your eyes off him.” Gaara spoke softly. He had a small smile on his face. Despite sitting stiff and straight, he seemed to relax. “If you blink it might be over.” Naruto 'harumphed' loudly, slouching back in his seat, pouting. Gaara looked from the arena to Sakura, “Though, I did tell him to put on a show.”

A battle cry brought Sakura back to the arena.

A flying side kick went towards her son, who didn't move.

Obito shifted to his left, dodging the kick. His opponent went to land when, like a volcano, sand shot out of the gourd and grabbed one of the boy's legs and flung him to the other side of the arena. The boy landed, on his feet against the wall.

"What the-" Sakura smiled as she heard Naruto's breathy voice.

"You can do it, Jiki-chan!" Rock Lee shrieked from the other side of the arena. "You have been training for this your whole ninja life!"

Obito pulled out a pair of sunglasses that glinted in the sunlight and slid them on his face. He crouched down in a fighting stance. The blond ran along the edge of the wall until he closed in on Obito. Sand swirled. The boy stopped, before throwing hand signs together, making water erupt from around him, charging towards Obito.

"That was unexpected..."

Obito jumped to the right, throwing two shurikens.

The other boy dodged the weapons, giving Obito the opportunity to rush in, moving almost faster than Sakura could see. He dropped, throwing a sweeping leg kick. Jiki jumped over it. Obito dropped to the ground before launching himself up and kicking Jiki in the jaw. He backflipped, sand thickening, becoming clumpy and falling around him. Jiki rushed in, almost blindsiding Obito, but the lumpy sand rose slowly to block the kick. Obito did a quick hand sign and with a poof, he disappeared.

The crowd erupted in cheers before quickly dying down.

"Where-where did he go!?" Naruto exclaimed.

Gaara snorted, a smile on his face.

Sakura looked back at the arena, her heart soaring. Jiki was staring at the ground, trying to stay on his toes as he spun, anticipating Obito to jump out of the ground.

Sakura glanced back at Gaara, who nudged the Hokage and pointed up.

"What the hell!?" Naruto gasped.

Sakura grinned. Obito was standing *above* the battlefield, seemingly

on air. The mummers and gasps made Jiki look up and jump in surprise.

“How-how is he walking on air?!”

“He's not walking on air.” Sakura smiled. “He's walking on sand.”

“He's not only manipulating the sand, he's also focusing his chakra to his feet.” Naruto stared at her with a gaping mouth. “Who is this kid?!”

“He’s my son.”

Obito suddenly dropped to the ground, holding his left leg up high, landing a hard ax kick on his opponent's shoulder.

The ground shook. Obito jumped back. He was covered in dirt and sand swirled around him. He watched as his opponent got to his feet shakily. He stood straight, his eyes bright.

“Oh no.” Sakura winced as the boy took his dangling arm and shoved it hard back into its socket. A sickening click echoed through the arena. He slowly resumed a fighting stance, breathing deeply. Obito had his hands crossed. Despite his short stature, he did look intimidating. Sakura heard Rock Lee let out a boisterous cheer, but Sakura couldn't make out what he said, if anything at all.

She watched the Jiki breath’s become steady. Almost calm. In a blink he was across the field and was aiming kicks and punches almost blindly at Obito. Obito dodged, backing away.

Then, an opening. The boy threw a swift side kick aimed at Obito's head, leaving his front open. Obito moved to the side when the blond slammed the foot into the ground, picking up the other in a spinning heel kick that hit Obito hard in the jaw with a sickening crack. The force of the attack sent Obito flying. Sakura rose to her feet, her body moving on its own. She felt hands on her before sand wrapped around her and pushed her back into his seat. Sakura looked behind her to see Team Temari.

“He's gotta' learn to stop trying to be so cute.” Mako said with a satisfied grin.

Sakura opened her mouth when Obito staggered to his feet. He was covered in a mixture of sand and dirt and blood. His glasses were busted, showing green eyes between flickers of broken glass. He

pulled them off before closing his eyes. The Blond Beast of Konoha moved fast. Obito shook his head as the boy advanced. Sakura almost let out a yell as the crowd gasped as Jiki jumped, fist high. Obito raised a fist and smashed the ground.

Sakura felt it from here.

“He’s definitely yours, that’s for sure.” Naruto huffed as the ground splintered and caved. Jiki stammered and fell while Obito used the distraction to reorient himself, stripping himself of his gourd and glasses and all distractions.

In the blink of an eye, Obito was behind the other boy and kicked hard. Jiki went flying as Obito raised a hand. A wall of sand rose in front of Jiki.

Jiki slammed into the wall, slumping tot he ground. Before he could recover, Obito was above him, kicking him hard gut.

And in a small puff of smoke, Obito was gone.

Everyone, including Jiki, searched the air, while Sakura stared at where her son had just been.

Sand still swirled in the air, almost like brown snowflakes. It suddenly stilled.

Sakura could almost see Jiki's hair stand on end as he twirled around frantically before dropping, his hands grabbing his leg warmers. Sakura's heart stopped as the sand moved quickly, forming a semicircle around the boy as Jiki ripped off a pair of heavy weights and tossed them carelessly aside. Jiki shifted, his hand moving to the ground to stand. The ground erupted around his hand and a small wrist wrapped tightly around Jiki’s.

Jiki let out a scream. As he wrenched his arm free the sand fell and slowly began wrapping around the boy to his neck. The hand, Obito's hands, peaking out of the ground was still as the sand wrapped tightly around the boy. The boy struck out his left foot aimed at her son's lone hand, but the sand caught it and grip it tightly. The trapped boy's eyes widened. He tried to move his foot, but Obito's grip was tight.

A gong sounded and the sand slid to the ground. Like a volcano, Obito erupted from the ground, lazily brushing dirt off himself as sand slowly moved back into his gourd.

“Winner! Obito of Suna.”

Sakura inhaled deeply, sinking into her chair. Cheers exploded around her-she was being shaken, but it all faded away as she watched her son-her baby. He tenderly touched his jaw, before walking over to the blond beast. He offered him his. The other boy stared for a moment before smiling wide and grabbing it. The boy pulled Obito in and spoke into his ear. Obito nodded as they walked towards the exit.

A hand slapped Sakura hard on the back, snapping her back to reality. She looked up to see Naruto was grinning widely down at her. “That was one hell of a fight.”

Sakura smiled weakly as she watched the two boys exit. Her eyes narrowed as she saw just a glimpse of Obito limping. She rose to her feet, turning to Naruto. “Take me to him.”

III

Sakura was almost growling. Obito was.

“Mother, *please* .” They were sitting in a small medic bay to the right of the arena.

Sakura watched with a small frown as an unfamiliar Konoha medic looked over Konoha's youngest beast, who was polite and grateful for their work while Rock Lee stood proudly over his shoulder, telling the boy how valiantly he fought and how proud he was. Naruto, even louder than Rock Lee, squealed over how exciting the match was to Gaara, who was looking at Obito proudly.

Obito was in his underwear, covered in sand, batting Sakura's hands away. “Mother, I'm fine.” He said through gritted teeth. He looked over her shoulder to Gaara for help, but received none.

“Obito...” She flicked his jaw lightly and his eyes almost rolled to the back of his head as his head flushed scarlet. While he was distracted, she grabbed his face and her hands started to glow. He relaxed immediately. “I didn't teach you this. Why are you trying to avoid healing?”

“My manly pride.” He said with confidence.

“Obito, you're nine.” She snapped. “You have no manly pride.” Face reddened.

“Moth-”

“Oh! I'm sorry!” She said dramatically, pulling her hands away from his face. He tested his jaw while glaring 'dangerously' at her. “I've hurt your manly pride.” She gripped his right leg, tighter than necessary. He didn't flinch, but she felt his pulse quicken. “You might be a man with pride, but you'll always be my baby.”

Obito tried to wriggle free.

The door burst open. Obito let out a not-so-manly scream.

Sakura rolled her eyes as Mako let Team Temari into the medic bay.

“Way to show 'em up, Obito!” Mako said loudly. “You'll be promoted, I'm sure.” Obito shrugged. Sakura rolled her eyes.

Mako eyed the spandex beast. “And nice shot! You got ‘em good!”

“It was an embarrassing shot.” Temari walked in followed by Hachiko, who waved at Obito.

“Good job.”

Obito scratched his newly healed jaw. “My bad.”

“If it was in a real fight-”

“I would have my team, Temari-sensei.”

Naruto hummed loudly. “True. He left quite a lot of openings that would have been perfect if there had been another person.”

“Or two.” Gaara added.

“But you're careless with yourself.” Sakura stood. “You've got to be more careful.”

Hachiko snorted. “That's an understatement.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes on her son. “Medical training. As soon as we get home.” Obito shrugged, hoping off the bed to retrieve his pants. “For all of you.”

The door opened and a blur of red burst in followed by Hinata with a baby in her arms. Sakura heard a strangling sound behind her and a shriek before the red blur stopped, blue eyes wide as they looked at

the boy behind her.

Sakura's eyes widened. She looked at Naruto, "Is this Mina-chan?!"

The girl jumped, her eyes slightly dazed. Sakura back at Obito, whose face was pale under the grit and grime of sand, staring wide eyed at the red haired girl. Sakura raised her brow as the girl's face reddened to the color of her hair before she dashed behind her father, burying her face in his coat.

Sakura back at her son, who quickly slipped on his shirt and pulled his mask up almost to his eyes before walking briskly out of the room while his team, including Temari, giggled behind him.

III

Obito tugged at his new flak jacket. He looked up to Gaara and frowned. "It's a bit big, sir."

Gaara gave him a small smile. "You'll grow into it." Obito frowned before looking behind him. His mother was currently being bear hugged by Naruto.

"So what happens now?" Obito looked up to the Kazekage.

Gaara's face showed nothing as he spoke quietly. "I'm not sure." They watched her get passed on to the flower shop woman, Ino. "Hopefully," Obito looked up to Gaara, whose arms were crossed, "I hope she decides to stay with us." Obito looked back at his mother, slowly crossing his own arms.

"Stay with us? In...in Suna?" *Where else would she go?*

Gaara nodded. "She's a strong asset to our hospital and our medic team."

Obito stared at her mother, who was getting hugged by the teacher of the kid he fought in the chuunin exams. "Well, I'm still only nine. So I doubt she's going anywhere." Gaara smiled knowingly.

"Uzumaki has a kind of personality that is hard to stay away from. And they've always been close." Obito watched as his mother flung herself back on the Hokage, who hugged her back, swinging her around. "I'm sure you understand the power of the Uzumaki charm." Obito frowned at the Kazekage who looked just as impassive as he always did. Obito looked back down to see a dash of red from behind

Uzumaki Hinata. His face heated up and pulled his hood over his head.

“Well, she can’t come back anyway. The Hokage told us as much.”

He heard the Kazekage make a noise that almost sounded like a snort. “You still haven’t seen the true power of Uzumaki Naruto.” Before Obito could ask just what that meant, Gaara stood straight, “It's time!” Gaara spoke clearly. After a moment, his mother peeled herself off the Hokage, before flinging herself at the Yamanaka woman again.

Obito frowned. “Dammit mother...” Obito took three steps before Gaara spoke softly.

“And what will be your choice?”

It didn't sound like a question particularly directed at him, but he answered anyway. “If I could get that woman two feet away from these people, I'd go home.” Obito looked back to see Gaara's small smile grow a little. He turned back to his mother. “It's time to go.” He grabbed at her arm and pulled lightly.

She detached herself from the blond. She had tears in her eyes. “You can't just disappear for ten years again, you hear!”

“Nine.” Obito said softly, pulling on his mother's arm. “You can come visit. Let's go! We're all waiting on you. If you don't come now, I'll leave you.” He almost stopped at the look on his mother's face.

She seemed so sad. But she nodded, wiping a tear from her cheek. “Alright, I'm ready.” She said a few more goodbyes, but eventually Obito was able to pull her back towards their party. He let go of her arm, but let his hand grasp hers. They joined the group before they all said their final goodbyes before heading back towards Suna.

Obito felt his body relax. They were going *home* .

The forest was thick around them when his mother squeezed his hand, “You can’t come back to Konoha.”

Obito almost tripped, “What?”

She shook her head under her cloak. “Not without me.”

Obito looked to where Temari-sensei and Gaara-jii were talking in front of them. And then to his teammates in their new flak jackets. “I

don’t think I make that decision,”

“You will not come back looking for your father.”

Obito’s heart beat in his head as he looked over at his mother. Her eyes were like hard jade.

“Why did you not want him here, Mother?” He wanted to pull his hand from hers and stand toe to toe with her. He was almost tall enough to do so.

But he couldn’t break her grip. Her eyes became glossy. “Because I don’t know what Kakashi will do when he finds out about you.”

“What does that-”

“I need to protect you *both* .”

He didn’t back down. “I don’t need you to protect me. Sasuke doesn’t scare me.”

Her eyes softened as her hand grasped his tightly. She nodded. “He should.

“And that’s what scares me.”

Obito opened his mouth when something changed in the wind. Before Obito could react, there was a hand on the back of his head, and his mother made a small *omph* sound. Obito tried to force his head up but he felt a strong arm on his neck.

“Naru-”

Naruto cut his mother off, “Sasuke at your three o'clock.”

Sasuke?! Obito struggled against the holds on his head and the death grip his mother was giving him.

“Obito, please stop.”

He ignored his mother. “But then Kakashi's-” Sand was pouring out of his gourd, but Obito felt a thumb press hard on a pressure point on his neck, causing his knees to almost give out.

“Calm down, Obito,” Gaara’s voice was at his ear.

He heard a low chuckle. “Feisty one, Kazekage-sama?”

“Hpmh. And they let that cretin out of the village?” There was a small crack and Obito felt his arm go numb as he almost collapsed. Far away, Naruto laughed, his mother gasped and he felt the hand on his neck duck under his armpits and scoop him up. His mother let go of his arm and pain exploded through his hand. He felt the secure weight of his gourd lift off his back. He looked up to see the Kazekage frowning. “Sorry, Obito,”

He looked behind the Kazekage's shoulder to see *him* ; his silver hair sticking up and slightly to the side. He had his hands in his pocket, walking without a care in the world.

Obito opened his mouth but it was covered by his mother’s hand. “I'm so sorry Obito...” His mother was crying as a warm tingling feeling shot up his hand.

Next to him had to be Uchiha Sasuke.

He was shorter than Kakashi, only coming up to his shoulder. He stood straight and walked with a purpose. His jet black hair made his pale skin almost glow. Anger filled him as his mother sobbed quietly next to him as he watched Uchiha Sasuke and Kakashi get looped into the Hokage’s arms, walking them towards Konoha.

Letters

Chapter Notes

nine to almost eleven

“I can't believe your mom broke your hand.” Hachiko held Obito's arm gently. Though it really didn't need to be held gently with the thick cast wrapped snugly around it.

“Yeah, in like, a million pieces.” Mako was sitting on a rock above Hachiko and Obito, looking down. They were relaxing after an easy training session.

Obito sighed deeply, wiggling his fingers in his cast. “She didn't do it on purpose.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Despite his mother healing his hand almost immediately, due to all the small bones (and nerves) she smashed with her ungodly strength, he had to have it wrapped in a cast for a few weeks. He couldn't help but assume longer since he hadn't really seen his mother since they got home. She had thrown herself into working long hours at the hospital or staying cooped up in her room. And he wasn't even sure why. Was it seeing all her friends again? Seeing what she was missing out on? Or was it seeing Kakashi? Or Sasuke?

Or was it him?

He frowned under his mask as Hachiko released his hand.

“This Uchiha guy scares the shit out of your Mom.”

Obito shrugged. “She's afraid he'll kill me.”

“Yeah, dude's completely nuts.” Obito and Hachiko looked up to see Mako reach into her flak jacket. “I was talking to one of the older guys at the Exams and they said he really went off the deep end after your mom left. They were little, but it's still talked about in the village a lot. There's a whole lot of people in the village that blame him for your mom leaving.

“Which is fair, since he is the reason she left. And everyone liked her.” Mako slid down the rock to land between Obito and Hachiko. “Apparently he tried to burn down her apartment. Took like six ANBU

to stop him." She smacked Obito lightly in the chest. "Guy spits fireballs."

"But anyways, he's still always searching for your Mom, wanting to get revenge for betraying him, or...something." She smiled, pulling out a small envelope "Your mom's paranoia might not be completely in vain. Since he still looks for her. It's why they always have him with some high ranked ANBU or something."

Obito took the letter. "Kakashi's an ANBU?" He held up the letter, "What's this?"

Mako shrugged. "You'd know better than me. The fact they let that guy out at all is crazy.

"That's from Mina. Got it in the mail yesterday."

Obito flipped it over. He shot her a dirty look. "You opened it."

"It came to my house!" Mako leaned back on her hands. "Yeah, well, it's pretty depressing."

In untidy writing, his name was scrawled across the top. He ripped it open.

Obito

I figured I'd send this to Mako so you don't get into trouble with your mom. I figured she doesn't know you've been here before.

Things have gotten awkward here, to say the least. Like you've got something on your face, but no one is telling you.

It's the way everyone is acting. Especially Dad. He keeps looking at Kakashi-jii like he's killed his dog. Lee-sensei has taken it upon himself to cry every time he sees him, but Kakashi-jii doesn't seem affected by that. But he has asked me why everyone is acting weird. I told him I don't know what he's talking about. Sorry...I panicked!

I hope that your hand is alright. Dad said as soon as Sasuke showed up your mom almost started hyperventilating and crying. But it's okay. It happens more than you'd think when it comes to him.

I think your mom will be happy soon though, I heard that Ino Yamanaka from the flower shop was going to go on holiday in the Wind country-I'm sure she's coming to visit her.

I'll try to keep an eye on things if something comes up. Until then, keep me posted.

Mina

Obito read the letter a few times, ignoring the rocks settling in his stomach as he tucked the letter back in the envelope.

“I think she wants you to write her back.” Mako sang.

Obito frowned but looked back down at his letter. He looked up to his teammates. “But what would I say?”

Mako shrugged. “Talk about your undying love?”

Obito dumped enough sand on her to bury her.

“Just tell her what's going on in your life.” Hachiko smiled.

“For the most part, that's classified.”

Mako was clawing her way out of the sand pile. “Well the non-classified shit, dumbass. Tell her about your home life. Or training.”

“Like how you're turning your teammate into a sand castle.”

Obito nodded thoughtfully before dumping another pile of sand on Mako as she squawked in protest.

III

Mina

Obito stopped and stared at the empty page. He looked up from the kitchen table and listened carefully.

The house was silent except for the dust storm raging outside. His mother wasn't expected home for a few more hours, but he could never be sure. Not with the way she's been acting lately.

Mina

Thank you for the letter. My hand is healing nicely.

He looked back up from the paper before looking down. He was making progress. Hachiko's words echoed in his head. “Tell her about your life...” He murmured to himself.

All is well here.

He inspected his words and nodded in content.

Obito

He slowly folded up the letter and gently slipped it in his pocket. He walked to the entrance hall, pulling his mask over his face. He reached into the bin near his shoes and pulled out a pair of goggles, pulling them tight over his eyes. He was pulling his hood up when the door blew open and wind and sand gushed into the hall.

His mother was wrapped tightly in a cloak, sporting her own goggles. She ripped off her hood and pulled down her own mask, smiling brightly at him. “Coming or going?”

“Mako's.” He said bluntly, letting his chakra move the sand into his gourd near the door. “I won't be long.”

She shrugged off her cloak, hanging it up. He watched her watch him for a moment, shifting from one foot to the next. She hesitated before speaking again. “Okay, I'll go start dinner.”

The air was growing tense. He had to get out. He brushed past her and opened the door. He forced the sand away as he turned to close the door.

“Don't be too long, okay?” His mother said softly.

He looked at her for a moment before nodding, “Yeah.”

He closed the door, heading for Mako's.

III

A month later, on a mission to Rain, Mako handed him over another letter.

It was a tome.

“What in the world could she say in something like this?” The girls giggled. Temari-sensei even smirked as he tested the weight of the letter. It had to weigh almost a pound. “This has to be like fifty pages...”

“Seventeen.” Obito narrowed his eyes in Mako's direction. She only shrugged. “It's boring and dull.” She gave him a once over. “Just like

yours.”

“Quit reading my mail.” He growled as he shoved the letter into his flak jacket. He pulled up his mask as he felt his face reddening.

“No, it's a good thing I did. You need to elaborate more.” Mako batted the sand that surrounded her like flies. “The girl wants to open her soul to you.” Mako tapped her chest. “And...her heart.” Mako was cackling as the sand became dense and tackled her to the ground.

“Why?” He said darkly. “She says all that?” He added sarcastically.

“No.” Mako scoffed, knocking sand off her shoulders. “But no one likes a boring letter.”

Before he could retaliate, Temari-sensei barked orders at them to stop bickering.

III

When he was alone in his room two days later, he opened her letter. Her letter wasn't boring. It was full of...interesting things. Academy things. It made Obito happy that she was doing well, but glad he didn't stick around in the academy for long. She talked in great length about her family. Which wasn't really difficult since it seemed to always be growing. She had her two little brothers and now she had “another one on the way” (whatever that meant). She also talked about her friends in great detail like he knew who any of them were. By the end of her seventeen page letter he felt like he knew all there was to know about her.

And she promised she'd write more.

He shook his head in amazement. “Girls are weird.” He folded it up, rolled on his belly and placed it with her other letter under his mattress in the upper corner.

Mako is right. If she sent me this, I should send her one a little longer.

He rolled off his bed and grabbed a notebook and a pen and slipped out of his room. As he passed the kitchen he saw his mother writing frantically, a small smile on her lips. He frowned, leaving the house without saying anything.

III

A month and a half later, he was able to write something.

Mina

Things here are the same.

He paused. Was that right? He scratched it out. She gave him an extensive daily routine schedule. He could at least give her something.

My mother has been talking to me again. Which is nice.

~~~~

The day after he'd seen her writing at the table, he was sitting on the couch, reading, when she burst into the living room, holding a giant wooden...thing. She was smiling widely. “Come on, we're going to have some bonding time.” She moved it to the center of the living room and slammed it down on the ground. The pictures on the wall shook. He stared at it.

“A shogi board?”

“Beats the hell out of our old one! Neighbors down the street were going to throw it away!” She opened the top and dumped pieces all over the floor. “Come on! Let's play!”

~~~~

I like how she did it. We're ignoring the fact she destroyed my hand.

~~~~

Obito watched as his mother frowned. Her frowning, it seemed, was a part of the game.It was the calm before the storm. The calm before he destroyed her. And she knows it.

“You know, Obi-chan.” She began. He smiled at her. “When I was your age, I didn't dream of-”

“Quit stalling Mother and lose.”

Her frown turned dark. “I'm not going to lose.”

He sighed, pointing at the board. “Your best option is moving this piece or this one. Either way, I take them out of play and win in six moves with this one. Nine with this one.” He leaned back. “I win.”
~~~~

She kicked the board. If it had been anyone else, it probably would have broken their foot. “It's a stupid game.”

“Stop letting me win.”

She glowered. “I haven't let you win since you were six.”

He grinned. “Well, maybe if you didn't suck-” He was tackled.

And tickled.

~~~~

He left the tickling out of his letter.

We've stopped playing Shogi, and now play Go. Or Checkers. We're both terrible at checkers.

He inspected his handy work before sealing the letter. And trudged off to Mako’s.

III

He watched in slow motion, mortified, as his mom 'tripped' over the Go board, scattering the pieces everywhere.

He jumped to his feet, scowling. “Cheater!” He looked down at narrowed green eyes.

It was then that he realized he was looking *down* at his mother.

When did this happen ?!

“Have you ever directed your team's missions?” She asked, slipping away from him, “call the shots?”

“That's Temari-sensei's job! Don’t change the subject! You did that on purpose. I was going to win-”

“We’ll never know.” She tsked. His mother put her hands on her hips. “I think you should ask her if you could help.”

“The other girls won't go along with it!” He said sitting up. “They don't like being told what to do by Temari-sensei. Let alone me.”

She winked at him, crouching down. “You should try it sometime.” She went to start picking up the knocked over pieces.
~~~~

He jumped off the couch. “I remember where they go, you cheater!” He ran to the pieces and started setting them up. “You're not distracting me!”

His mother laughed.

III

His letter from Mina was just as long, if not longer, than the one before. And with how quickly it arrived, it seemed she was just waiting for him to send his to send hers. It seemed she was excited to hear, really hear, from him. Her letter was full of detailed remarks on his letter.

He smiled.

III

Mina,

My mother decided to give us extensive specialized training.

He bit his lip at the sentence.

Well...she attempted.

~~~

True to her word, Obito's mother started giving the team special medic training.

In the following months they had barely scraped past the healing of minor scratches and cuts and were moving on to breaks.

Team Temari wasn't looking forward to this. Sakura had said the best way to learn was 'practically.'

“Obito-I will kill you after this,” Mako grumbled, but Obito ignored her as he pushed green chakra through his fingertips. Mako's muscles flexed under his fingers. It told him she was in pain. He could feel his mothers eyes on him and he knew he had a lot more riding on learning this healing business than the rest of his team.

Mako's face was turning a very unhealthy shade of white. He swallowed thickly as he returned to concentrating on her arm. “Breath through your nose.” He mumbled to his teammate as he tried to control his chakra through her arm. She inhaled deeply as he felt
~~~

something slip. She yanked her hand away and his heart dropped to his stomach. He felt his mother push him lightly out of the way and sit next to Mako.

She smiled softly. But her eyes were sad. “You cut an artery. But that's alright. You'll get the hang of it.” Within seconds, Mako's arm was patched up. She flexed a few times before turning to Sakura.

“Thank you, Haruno-san.” The glint in her eye when she turned to Obito made his stomach drop. “Is-is my turn to try healing?” Her voice was too innocent.

His mother gave him a small, sorry smile before moving towards him. Sand shot from the ground, forming a barrier around him as he backed away. “But I'm your son.”

His mother broke through the sand as if it was made of rice paper and grabbed his arm. “It's the most practical way to learn.”

His mind raced. “But, mother, you've already broken it once.” Perhaps the pathetic tone of voice was too much because she only yanked him harder and put two hands on his little arm.

“It's the fastest, most practical way to learn.” Like breaking a twig, Obito heard a deafening crack in his arm as he fell to his knees as his arm went numb.

Mako jumped up and raced to him. “Babito,” She snickered, “it's not even broken.” She carefully placed his arm in between her fingers and let green chakra move around it in the same fashion as he did hers a few minutes before. It was there. It just wasn't healing.

~~~

In the end, Obito wrote, his hand trembling slightly. *Hachiko was the only one who learned anything properly.*

“There's still poison.” His mother's voice tried not to sound hurt as she walked home with her arm around him lightly.

I have one last chance.

He looked down at his letter and frowned. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, but what if it fell into enemy hands?

What if it fell into her father's hands? Kakashi hands? He read over it
~~~

again and decided that she could use her imagination.

He filled the rest of the page and half of another with mindless missions they'd been going on.

He paused before looking around to make sure his team wasn't anywhere near him. Because he could never know.

I don't know when I'll be back to Konoha. He looked around again. *But hopefully soon.*

He quickly scrawled his name as he crumpled the letter and shoved it into his pocket, launching up out of his seat. He walked quickly towards the Kazekage tower. He would not be taking these to Mako again.

He pulled out the crumpled letter. Did he say everything right? Did he put too much confidential information in the lines?

Did he not mention her letter enough? Was that something he should have done? Deep in thought, he almost didn't realize someone was coming at him fast until it was almost too late. He ducked quickly and shot out his leg in a sweeping motion without looking up from his letter. *Perhaps I should say something about her problem with her bro-*

A punch narrowly missed him. It wasn't his sand that protected him-it was still a little slow and Gaara-jii should be able to help me with that-but the puncher's terrible aim.

He looked up with a raised eyebrow. “What are you doing?” It was a kid a few years older than him, but not quite as old as the girls. He had sandy brown hair and slightly tan skin. It took a minute to click that it was Dan-from the academy. The boy still towered over him, but he could still see the glinting Suna insignia on his headband. “You graduated?” Judging by the boy's reddening face, he shouldn't have sounded so shocked.

Dan attempted to grabbed his chuunin flak jacket, his knuckles cracking.

Obito side stepped him, slipping his letter back in his pocket. He went to continue towards the tower but Dan reached out for him. Sand from the ground shot up and grabbed the boy by the wrist. Collective gasped came from behind the taller boy and it was only then that Obito realized that there were more of them.

“Cute.” Obito gave him a fake smile, creasing his eyes for extra effect. “You have a team.” Obito walked around the trapped boy, letting his hands slip into his pockets. He really needed to work on his 'in-village' observation skills.

Dan growled and wrestled against the small tower of sand that held his arm in place.

“Kazekage's student, remember?” Obito tsked. “Plus you should know you shouldn't mess with a Chuunin.”

“Chu-chu-!”

“Nnin, yes.” Obito didn't bother turning around but knew, just knew he'd have to stop and put postscript in the letter and tell Mina about this.

She'd love it.

III

Three weeks later, Obito was asked to stay behind after a mission debriefing. Obito waited for the rest of the team to fall out before moving to stand closer to the Kazekage's desk. Gaara-jii pulled out an opened letter. “Make sure to include that you want them sent here. And don't get too upset about not being able to heal. From what I hear, it's quite difficult.”

“Why-you read it?” Obito wanted the floor to drop out from underneath him.

Obito watched as the leader of Suna just gave him a small smile. “You've had a run in with your academy friends?”

Obito rolled his eyes and nodded. He knew the Kazekage couldn't call them anything more harsh than that.

“You'll probably see more of them, now that they are starting to trickle out of the academy. Try not to let it get you down.”

Obito frowned. “How would it get me down? I'm a chuunin.”

“Because you are more like your mother than you know.” Obito watched his mentor as he moved around the desk. “You're almost eleven, Obito, and you are already so gifted.” Gaara-jii looked at him with a sparkle in his eye. “Any thoughts on becoming a Jounin?”

Obito was taken aback. “Jounin?”

“I think you're ready.”

Obito stared in wonder at his teacher-at the leader of his village. “You're wanting me to go out for Jounin?”

“Only if you're ready.” He said calmly, watching.

Obito looked from him to the door behind them. His mind ran to Mako and Hachiko. “No. Not yet. I still have a lot to learn with my team.”

Gaara-jii's smile widened. It was a little eerie. “Good. Dismissed.” Obito went to leave before turning around. “Do you really think I'm ready?”

Gaara-jii looked at him with no emotions. “I think you need to work out some small things, but overall I think you're competent.” Gaara-jii straightened. Obito watched as he walked around his desk, holding a large box. It was easy for Gaara-jii to hold, but for Obito, it took a bit to grasp the corners. “Your answer was the one I was looking for.” Obito froze as the Kazekage ruffled his hair. “Dismissed.”

Obito turned, stopped and turned back, thinking about delay on his sand. “Can-”

“I am always here to help. You just have to ask.”

Obito's heart raced with joy as he bowed awkwardly with his box. “Thank you, Kazekage-sama.”

Gaara-jii nodded for him to take his leave.

III

Mina, Obito frantically scrawled.

He couldn't quite put into words what he was trying to say. So many things racing through him made his hand shake.

He wasn't sure how to put everything into writing; Gaara-jii telling him he's almost ready to become a jounin and *the box* -

His eyes went to the letter that had been taped inside the box.

Obito- This is not a requirement, nor do I expect anything-but I believe this

might help you as you excel.

It was a new vest; thin and hard to the touch.

It looked identical to the Kazekage's.

His fingers trembled as he picked it up out of the box and turned it over. His eyes widened seeing the single circle on the back. Like his mother's. He looked down to his dirty, tearing flak jacket. He shucked it off and put the new one on.

It fit, but his sleeves puffed awkwardly and it fit over his standard chuunin uniform awkwardly. He'd need something better. He started to pull the outfit off and stopped. The was so entranced by the his new vest, he didn't realize there was more in the box.

There was a sand colored, skin tight, long sleeved shirt with a mask attached. A black coat with a red lining was tucked underneath it similar to Gaara-jii's outfit. The only difference was it had a cowl style hood. He jerked the coat out of the box, almost smacking himself in the head with a scroll that had been tucked in the middle.

He stared at it dumbly before tossing the jacket to the side and gripping the scroll, unrolling it dramatically and releasing the seal.

Inside was a new gourd. He gasped as his eyes absorbed it. The strap had stitched in the middle "Obito of the Sand."

There was another letter. "Your old one is getting small."

Oh, Mina! He looked over to his new gear giggling. He didn't know how to put all this into writing. But he wanted to tell her. He jumped up grabbing an envelope. Maybe she'll get it.

III

Two days later he received a letter back.

So exciting!

He wasn't sure what she meant but he was sure they were on the same page.

Ino

Chapter Notes

twelve

The worst age

“You coming or going?”

“Leaving.” Obito said calmly, slipping his shoes on. “Training with Gaara-jii today.”

She smiled brightly, adjusting the bag on her shoulder. “Have fun!” When she moved, he noticed it was full of scrolls.

He stared at her. “Are...those all-”

She was almost giggling. “Letters, yes.” Her smile widened. “Though,” She pulled out a heavy looking one. “I think this might be some stuff Tsunade-shisho wants me to look at. “ She waggled it around the best she could. “Medical jutsu's, poison's and their effects.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “You interested?”

“I'll...pass.”

She frowned, tapping it on his head lightly. It felt like a brick. “Fine. But I'm sure it will be mighty informative.”

“And boring.” He gripped the door. He looked back down at the bag. It had to have seven letters with the same neat letters across the front, three with her name messily scrawled and five or six more he couldn't see.

His stomach curled. He *knew* none of them were from Kakashi.

“Enjoy your letters.” He furrowed his brow as it came off his tongue bitterly. He pulled the door open, holding against it firmly so the wind didn't threaten to slam it open.

III

“Is...is this necessary?”

“Yes.” Mako, Hachiko and Kankuro said a bit too enthusiastically.

They were holding rocks, smiling menacingly.

He looked at the Kazekage. “Is this-”

Gaara seemed to mull it over for a few seconds. “I believe this is the best way to learn.”

“But, but you could-”

“Team Bonding, Babito.” Mako's eyes gleamed. “We want to help you!”

“And if it doesn't work, you can work on your healing!” Hachiko said a little too sweetly.

“Hey, we're not hitting him that hard.” Temari-sensei came to his rescue. She stared at her older brother. “Especially you.”

Gaara took a few steps closer to him. “Concentrate hard-this has to become second nature to you.” Obito took a shaky breath, pulling up his mask and snapping his goggles into place. Slowly, very slowly, he let the sand roll over his body. It felt grainy and unpleasant, but it was better than the rocks would be. “Now tighten. Like a sand coffin on yourself, but not as tight.”

He shuddered and slowly worked on condensing the sand.

Twack!

He lost his concentration as light exploded in his eyes.

“Oops.” He heard Mako say.

III

After the sixth day of 'training' he started getting the hang of it. The rocks were leaving bruises, but not breaking completely through the sand armor. And the best part? Mako had to sit and watch.

III

Hachiko and Mako looked at each other and then to him. “What the hell are we going to do?!” Mako hissed. They were behind a rock as Temari-sensei battled three Jounin ranked men while trying to keep two more from finding them. “She won't hold out much longer!”

Obito peaked over the rock and threw sand up to block a shower of

missiles. Hachiko was working on a nasty gash on Obito's leg as Obito struggled with healing Mako's sprained wrist. He was afraid he was making it worse.

“I have an idea. Will you listen?”

“What?”

“Hachi goes in short, use a bow staff and explosive tags.”

“You idiot, you don't use explo-”

“Mako, goes long.”

“I'm a short distant-”

They paused at Temari-sensei's cry.

“Do it.”

The girls looked at each other and curled their lip. “If I die, I'll kill you.” Hachiko said as she stopped healing and got ready to move. “Bow staff? I can't even use-”

“It's similar to the fan-just don't try to use wind.” He watched her pull out a scroll and release the seal, revealing a bamboo staff. She gripped it tightly. “Wait for my signal.”

Mako, surprisingly, just moved back. “How far.”

Obito looked back over the rock. “Sixty yards.” She moved.

Hachiko gave him one last dark look before she moved. He quickly pulled his sand into him and locked in sand armor. He pulled out three kunai.

Three seconds. One, two, “Now!” He darted from behind the rock, throwing one kunai at the man behind Hachiko, who swung sharply, catching the man behind her in the head. “Jab back!” She pulled the butt sharply past her, catching another guy. Two more joined the fight and Obito focused sand out of his gourd over top one like a tidal wave, giving Hachiko time to pull out a grenade.

“Now!” He was punched hard in the face, but it only echoed in his sand shell. She pulled it as he tackled their sensei towards Hachiko and wrapped the two of them in a ball as the grenades went off. He felt sand flake off him as he felt the chakra drain quickly. She shook it

off and raced to help Mako.

The men landed at her feet and she was easily taking them down in their disorientation.

He punched one on the temple as she kicked them in the knee. His body wasn't sure which way to go.

As the last one fell. He collapsed. His sand curling and slowly trailing back into its home in his gourd.

Mako laughed as she grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up. “Never in a million years would I have thought to go long.”

“Or use a grenade!? Obito!?” Temari-sensei shouted as she came around. “Are you mad?”

“He knew what he was doing!” Mako defended. “It's about time we change things up!”

He looked at her. “Really?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course! That was totally badass!”

He smiled as he heard Hachiko admit that what he said was right.”

“Well, next time, let's work on this stuff on the training grounds before we try it practically.” Temari-sensei sighed.

III

Obito practically skipped home from training. They were listening to him. They even had *code* . The whole practice, he came up with scenarios (all of which all three girls threw curve balls at him, which he easily deflected). They came up with maneuvers that even included just the three of them as Temari-sensei fought.

Temari-sensei even said if they get good enough, they could go out without her!

He felt like he was floating on a cloud.

He stopped outside his house, staring at it.

Something wasn't right.

Obito flung the front door open dramatically, freezing at the sight of

his mother with her hair in a messy ponytail, torn shirt and shorts, covered in a coral colored paint. She was holding a dripping paint brush. Her green eyes looked brighter in contrast to the paint and wide with shock at seeing him-she looked like she just got caught downing something like a bag of kittens.

Ino didn't look much better.

He raised a brow, looking between the two women before gently lowering his gourd.

"I-I thought it really needed a new color..." his mother seemed flustered as she looked from him to Ino to the wall back to him with a small smile. The same smile he gave her when he tracked sand through the house.

"Your Face or the walls?" Obito said carefully.

"You see, there was an accident..."

Ino burst into a fit of giggles. His mother turned to her and started to shush her, trying to mask her giggles and a big grin plastered on her face.

Obito watched as this caused the women to start giggling louder and Ino screeched “It was your fault, forehead!”

“No! You splattered me first, Ino-pig!” Obito frowned as he watched them. He ignored the churning in his stomach before sighing loudly. He picked up his gourd and headed back out the door.

"Obito, where are you going?" His mother asked through fits of laughter. She straightened up and put her hands on her hips. Coral paint was falling onto the floor.

"To find more testosterone." He said duly. “I'm going to Mako's.”

He closed the door, looking back when he heard fits of giggles.

His heart clenched.

III

“When did she even get here!?” Obito fumed, pacing in Mako's living room. “She wasn't here this morning! And now she is!” He spun and looked at Mako. “Andwhatthehellareyoudoing!?”

Mako didn't look up at him. “What?” She sighed. “So what your mom was giggling like that.”

“She's never giggled-never smiled like that.” He paced the room a few more times. “I didn't realize how depressed she was until she-”

“Moms don't share their sadness-not depression-with their kids, Babito.” Mako said in a matter of fact voice. She looked up from painting her nails.

When did Mako start painting her nails?!

He watched her horrified. “Think about it though; your mom hasn't had anyone to like, really talk to. Sure, she's got her work colleagues but not like...her best friend.” She looked back down to her nails.

“There's Temari-sensei.” He pointed out, warily watching as she started to paint the same nail the same color it already was.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Your son's sensei is not your best friend. It is the person that comes to your door and tells you he's not dead, but you should still come to the hospital anyways.”

“They have history.” He countered.

“That's like saying that Mina's brother is your best friend because you saw him walking down the street.”

“I've never met-”

“You're really missing the point.”

“Why are you painting your nails?” He decided that was the more important question.

She shrugged. “I feel like being girly.”

III

“Ino-pig?”

“It's a nickname.” Ino said from the stove.

He looked to his mother. “Why is she cooking! Isn't she the guest?”

Ino laughed. “You're mother's not much of a cook.”

“She's a damn good cook.” Obito slapped his hand on the table.

“Language!”

Obito sighed loudly, slipping from the kitchen chair, moving down the hall towards the front door. His hands balled in a fist.

“Where are you going?!” Sakura called, but did not follow.

“Training.”

“It's five a.m.!”

“Five a.m. Training!” He closed the door behind him.

III

Four days later, Ino-pig was still there. They were playing shogi together. On *his* board.

And Ino was terrible. And his mother! She was acting like she was even more terrible than her! And they were giggling.

He looked up from his pen and paper on the couch and watched as they both made terrible moves.

“What are you doing over there, Obito.” Ino asked sweetly.

“Classified to Suna personnel only.” He said.

“What are you doing over there, Obito?” His mother echoed.

“Tactical Strategy.” Which wasn't a lie. He was telling Mina how he was practicing tactical strategy with Kankuro.

They giggled. He took a steady breath. In honesty, he was writing to Mina about how he wanted this woman gone. To send Shikamaru-sensei to come and take her away.

“I bet it's a love letter.” Ino whispered loud enough for him to hear.

He rose to his feet and left.

III

When Obito knocked on the Kazekage's door and demanded they spar, Gaara didn't ask why. When the boy demanded he not take it easy on

him, Gaara sighed, but didn't go too easy on the boy. He had a feeling he knew what this was all about. He knew what happened in his own village.

Obito was distracted, and it wasn't good for training. After Obito's fourth time getting trapped in the sand coffin, Gaara stopped. The boy crumpled to the ground. Punching the ground in frustration, making a small crater.

"Something's on your mind."

Obito frowned, wiping crusted sand off his face. Obito's face was swollen, his eyes red. "My mother is happy." He muttered. He looked up to Gaara before looking down at the small crater he made. “She wasn't happy before.”

"She's just missed her friend." He explained softly.

Obito's frown deepened. “Because of me.”

Gaara crossed his arms. "Is the spoiled, only child jealous of his mother spending time with someone else?" Obito opened his mouth to say something, but Gaara spoke again. “Despite trying to make it sound like you're trying to make it your fault and blame yourself, you're just trying to make this about you.” Obito stared at him coldly, “your mother has never had a friend come visit her.”

"She's spent time with baa-"

“-And you know that is not the same.” Obito pouted. Gaara thought for a moment before speaking. “It is like when Uzumaki Naruto comes to visit me.”

Obito scrunched his face, “How is-”

“Because Uzamaki Naruto is my truest friend.” Gaara sat down across from Obito, “when he is around I can truly be myself.”

“But you can be that way with-”

Gaara held up a hand. “Neither your mother nor I can be that way around you.” He smiled gently, “you are your mother's son and you are my apprentice. We have a special bond that cannot be broken by anyone. But a bond of friendship is a different type of bond. A bond that is different for each person.

“Like the bond between your teammates and Temari are different. And the bond between Uzumaki Mina and Mako.” He touched Obito's shoulder. “You're only starting to see the world from multiple perceptions, Obito. It's normal. You see your mother happy now because you couldn't see the happiness you brought her because it was normal. You are used to it.”

Obito looked away, but seemed to be absorbing his words. He frowned before sighing. “I almost wish I hadn't become a chuunin.”

Gaara ruffled the boy's hair before sitting back, getting ready to rise. “Change was going to happen no matter what, Obito. You couldn't expect to live in our sandy paradise forever. The outside world comes and kicks up the sand. And it might not settle back to where it was, but it does settle and life goes on. I don't think Sakura has realized that yet.”

Obito looked at him strangely.

Gaara nodded. “Let your mother's friend kick up sand. It will settle back down. You'll have her all to yourself again soon."

Obito got to his feet too, but still sulked. “Now you make me sound like a piece of shit.”

Gaara chuckled softly. “You've just been spoiled. And ten. And not used to really having to share her.”

Obito stood, letting the sand roll off him. He took a few breaths and pulled his mask up. Beckoning for his sensei. “Come on. Let's go. "

Gaara nodded.

III

Obito closed the front door noiselessly, slipping into the darkness of the house. He slowly slipped off his shoes and tiptoed down the hall. He stopped only to peer into the living room where all the pillows and spare blankets had been thrown into a pile. Only a mass of pink and blonde hair could be seen in the Moonlight. They were clasping hands. It would have looked more serene if they were smiling instead of snoring softly with their mouths open.

Obito sighed, looking down the hallway. The walls were a light green now. The color of his and his mother's eyes.

“Girls are weird.” He whispered before moving to his room.

III

“You sealed your room?”

Obito almost jumped out of his skin, slamming his hand on the paper in front of him. He had written a rather lengthy rant of how girls were weird and how Mina didn't properly warn him about what would happen if Ino came to Suna.

He glared at the said woman, who was smiling brightly at him from her perch on the kitchen counter.

He wondered if this was how his teammates acted when he wasn't around.

"For my privacy." He slowly folded up his piece of paper.

Ino made herself at home at his table. "You’re ten."

"You all had already been in there. Twice." He noticed after he locked himself in his room the night before. He would have confronted them immediately, but if he did, then his mother would think he had something to hide. To his relief, they hadn't snooped under his mattress-the small stack of letters were still there, unperturbed.

Ino winked. "You got something to hide?"

“I'm ten.” Obito scoffed. She was looking at the paper in his hand. He tucked the paper into his flak jacket. "Of course. I'm a shinobi.”

She rolled her eyes, “When I was your age-”

“Were you a Ninja?!” He looked at her with fake mild amazement. At her scowl, he went back to his letter. “I didn't think-”

“You wouldn't be writing to a certain redhead writing fiend-”

"No idea what you're talking about." He snipped, leaning over the table, glaring harshly.

She wasn't fazed. "I won't tell Sakura." She looked behind him towards the hall before moving towards the table, dropping her voice, “We both know she wouldn’t be a fan of you having correspondence with anyone in Konoha.”

He watched her for a moment, still glaring. He thought of drowning her in a wave of sand, but he was certain he could hear his mother cracking her knuckles. He finally gave up and leaned back in his chair.

"Thank you."

Ino leaned across the table. "I think it's cute. You and your little long distance girl-"

"She's a contact. It's important to build allies in distant lands. She's my contact in Konoha. Nothing more. I have others in other places." Obito was starting to hate girls. All of them. They always said the same thing. "How long are you going to be here?"

Ino shrugged. "Few more days. I can't be gone for too long. Shop to run. Shinobi things to do."

Obito rolled his eyes and she pushed herself off the counter and moved to get a glass of water. She smiled knowingly into her glass.

Obito looked down at the table. He coughed. "Thanks. For coming, I guess. It-it means a lot to her." He folded his letter. “I've never seen her so happy.”

Ino watched him for a moment before putting her cup down and staring at him with emotionless eyes. It was a bit unnerving. "I didn't know she was here. Right here for so long.” She sucked her teeth. “She must have been so lonely."

"She had the people at the hospital. They have always been nice to her." He picked up his cup and immediately put it down. “She had me.”

Ino chuckled softly before turning to look at him, watching him for a moment. "I'd like to thank you too, little man. You saved her.” She nodded as her eyes unfocused. “You saved her from-from a terrible situation." She looked away but Obito could see the shine in her eyes. "If she would have stayed, she probably wouldn't have ever smiled again." She wiped her eyes.

Obito's heart clenched. "It's not like I really-"

"But you did.” Ino reached across the table and ruffled his hair. "So thanks. Thank you for taking care of her. "

Obito swallowed a lump in his throat. "Well, someone has to."

III

He tried to remember the sincerity in Ino's voice as the next few days felt like the longest in his life. His mother never asked about the giant seal, so he hoped she hadn't realized it wasn't real.

He took an old shoe box and hid all his letters in it. And locking it with a real seal.

Though, Ino did help with the healing lessons. And, maybe, because she was so much worse at healing than his mother was, he was able to understand her instructions more than his mother's and was able to scrape to together enough 'glue' to hold a bone together for a few hours.

And that made his mother happy.

He also finished his letter to Mina telling her to stop writing the letters to him in public. That people could see.

Her response back was short and sweet.

Fuck you.

He could almost see her giggling after she wrote it.

Kakashi

Chapter Notes

thirteen

Obito didn't go on many solo missions. It wasn't really his thing. To him, he wasn't the 'best' ninja (despite his Jounin rank). Sure he could do it, but he worked best as support. Was good at protecting his team. And he was fine with that. But when the Kazekage ask you to go on a mission, you have to go.

Obito inhaled deeply as he pulled his mask up. He stared at himself in the mirror for a moment. His team hadn't laughed at him when he started wearing his new clothes. The opposite in fact; Temari-sensei had given him a small nod. Hachiko smiled. Mako had punched him in the stomach, shaking her hand as she approved his new chest protector. His mother had teared up a little before ruffling his hair.

He grabbed his gourd and slipped out of his room quietly. He passed his mother curled on the couch, reading. “Come home through the front door, not the hospital door!” She called. She always tried to sound indifferent as she called out her farewell, as if she didn't worry about him at thirteen like she did when he was six. Obito smiled as her eyes flashed up to him, the worry not only in her voice.

“I will, mom.” He called. He said, heading towards the entrance way. He slipped on his shoes and walked out the front door.

III

Kakashi Hatake had to admit to himself.

This...this wasn't going as plan.

If it had been going according to plan, he wouldn't be bleeding so much. Or tied to this tree. His hands were bound to opposite branches while his legs and feet were bound to the trunk. His shoulders were threatening to dislocate if he struggled too much.

He tensed as the air around him shifted. When the punch struck an already broken rib, and possible punctured lung, it took his breath away.

“Now, if you don't answer correctly.” The voice drawled casually. He

couldn't remember what the man looked like-he'd lost his vision hours ago, but he liked to imagine he had some gold teeth and maybe a pegged leg. The man was still talking, but Kakashi was having a hard time listening. “We'll go back to using the knife.” To emphasize his point, he dragged something pointy-the knife- down the right side of his face. He felt blood, or sweat, dribble down his cheek. The man patted Kakashi on the cheek, making Kakashi spit a bit of blood into his mask.

The man laughed. “What's your answer, Copy Ninja.”

Kakashi didn't remember what the question even was, but he chuckled anyway. “I was hoping you'd sharpened the blade. It was getting a little-” luckily, it was the fist again.

At least they're safe. Kakashi let the blood dribble out of his mouth as he released the tension in his body, coughing wetly into his mask. By the time his team makes it back to Konoha and returns with reinforcements, it would be too late for him, but maybe they could catch these bastards before they got too far.

It had been a simple mission; collect a stolen scroll from bandits. But wasn't it just his luck that the contractor didn't tell them exactly how dangerous these ninja's were. The C rank mission should have been an A-Rank or S-rank for ANBU but he and the rest of his Chuunin team didn't realize it until he had used himself as a shield (and a pin cushion) to let them escape.

He recalled with a lazy smile the fight with Zabuza and how well his little Team 7 had done. And how, surprisingly, none of them had died.

It still baffled him.

It was then that Kakashi realized it had become very quiet.

Kakashi opened his eyes, his sharingan spinning weakly. Light twinkled in the corner of his right eye, but other than that it was darkness.

The wind picked up, rustling the leaves ominously. “What's going on guys?” He asked as nonchalantly as possible.

“Oi.” One of the ninja to his left ask in a whisper. “How close are we to Wind?”

There was a long pause. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, dammit!”

“About a day out.” Kakashi tried to make it sound cheery, but it sounded pained. “But it gets windy in Fire too.”

Kakashi was surprised when they didn’t retaliate with his little remark. In fact, the assailant’s voice trembled. “Then…then why-why is there sand?”

“Sa-”

One shrieked. “Oh god! Look out-” His voice muffled as the roar of what sounded like a tidal wave echoed through the trees. It was quiet again.

Gaara-sama?

There was a loud boom, and a second later, a strangled cry. And then it was quiet.

Kakashi felt pellets hitting his face, as he stared blankly out at the darkness. He tried to push more chakra into his Sharingan, but it was useless.

After a few seconds of silence, Kakashi spoke as loud as he could. “H-Hello?”

The hair on Kakashi's back stood on end as something warm slid around him like slime.

“Where is it!?” The knife guy said, trembling. Then there was rumbling. “The shit's going on here?!”

A pause.

“The fuck!? The guy’s on the tree!?” This was a new voice-not Gaara voice. It cracked on the curse. It was a young kid. “Stop! You fuck!” There was a loud whooshing sound and another strangled cry. The air became stale and silent before there was a loud scream. “Why are you tying people to fucking trees!?” The kid’s voice cracked again, his voice strained on the curse.

He wasn’t used to cursing.

“Who do you think you are?!” The raspy voice seemed far away.

There was an exasperated sigh.“I won't hurt- *kill* you if you leave what

you found here and get lost.” The young voice crackled a bit but it sounded like it was in control. Kakashi smiled. The boy reminded him of Naruto going up against Haku.

He closed his eyes, exhaling.

The raspy voice laughed. “You really think you can defeat me, you little brat?”

“No.” The boy sounded bored. There was a scream. “I know.”

“You little bastard!” The sound of metal on metal seemed so distant. There was another whooshing sound and a strangled cry.

Then silence.

Kakashi counted to nineteen before he heard a staggering breath. “Now just stay there!” Kakashi let out a shaky breath as there was some muffled cursing “I said stay fucking put.” The boy muttered. One more cry and a heavy sigh. “What a fucking mess.”

Slowly, Kakashi felt fresh air move around him. “Hold on-uh,” There was a pause “Leaf guy. I'm going to untie your shoulders. Just relax, you won't fall.” Kakashi tensed as he felt something pointy near his wrist. He let out a slow breath as he felt his wrist become freed. But despite being free, his arm didn't fall to his side. It landed on something hard and scratchy. “If I let your arms fall, you might pass out or something. Circulation.” His other hand came free. They slowly started lowering. Kakashi sighed. “Legs.” The boy said methodically. “I'm going to sort of tie you up again. But it's only to keep you from causing anymore damage to yourself.”

Kakashi felt himself slowly slide down the trunk, landing on a soft cushion beneath him. Kakashi coughed up blood. He couldn't feel anything anymore.

“Thank-”

“Shut up.” The boy said shortly. There was movement around him and small hands pushed his chin up.

“Holy fuck.” The boy whispered, his voice cracking on the curse again. “Hold on, hold on, hold on.” He felt something pointy on his cheek and fingers on his mask. He let out a feeble protest, but he could hear his mask ripping as cold air rushed his cheeks. Once his mouth was clear he coughed freely. “Oh man...” The boy's voice was shaky as he

felt small hands on his chest. The fingers ran down his torso, stopping at the hem of his shirt. Kakashi tensed as he felt something pointy on his stomach. “I'm not going to hurt you.” He heard ripping and cold air rushed his chest. “Fuck!” He felt the point run along his arms like the tip of a pencil before he heard a slapping sound as the top of his body became cold. He started trembling as he gulped down fresh air.

“Eh...Easy now.” Kakashi still heard cursing from somewhere in the distance. “Don't tense.” The boy said as Kakashi felt himself move from the tree.

He tried not to wince. And failed.

“It's alright,” the boy whispered, “you're alright. I've got you.” Kakashi was now laying down. A familiar warmth spread through his chest. He sighed loudly, body melting.

It was healing chakra.

He closed his useless eyes. “Who are you?”

“Please don't talk.” The boy's voice was tense. “Blood in lungs.”

Kakashi hummed, making himself cough blood.

The boy grunted. The warmth left his chest and moved to his stomach. “You are so lucky.” The boy whispered with a bit of awe in his voice. “If I hadn't been in the area when I was, you'd be dead.”

Kakashi hummed. “Lucky for that.”

“Shut up.”

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

The boy snorted. “I don't kiss my mother.”

Kakashi chuckled, wincing slightly. “Maybe you should. I think mother's like that.” The warmth left and fingers trailed up his body. It stopped at his neck for a moment before making it to his face. The boy traced the scar on his left eye. Kakashi opened his heavy lids. “Don't do that.”

“I won't touch your eye. It's your head.” Warmth spread around his face. “You got punched in the nose.” The boy let out a small whine. “And the temple. Multiple times. When I get rid of the swelling, you should get a little of sight back. And be able to breathe better.”

Kakashi nodded. “I'm lucky a field medic dropped in.”

“Literally dropped in. But...I'm not a field medic.”

“Don't care.” Kakashi winced.

They fell into silence.

“The fuck is wrong with your eye?” They moved back a bit as the Sharingan started to spin. He could see shadows.

“It's supposed to be like that.”

“I...I don't think so...” The boy's fingers pulled at his eyelid. “I think it's seriously infected...”

“Trust me.”

The boy paused, “Maybe I am a medic. It shouldn't look like that.” He moved to another part of his face.

Slowly the pain in his head subsided and he opened his eyes. The boy in front of him couldn't be more than *ten* . The boy had moved back to work on his abdomen; his eyes clenched shut and his lip sticking out slightly as he healed. He started feeling pain again.

The pain was good. It meant he was alive.

“Your team?” Kakashi mumbled. “Where's your-”

“Shut it.”

Kakashi smiled as he slowly began to feel his fingers. He wiggled them a little as he closed his right eye and let the sharingan spin and tell the tale of the ten year old that saved his life. It was dark and he could really only see shadows, but he could see the boy's major features. The boy still hadn't lost all his baby fat, but his face was beginning to lean out. He had high cheek bones and pointed, slightly familiar, nose. But the familiarity could be the blood loss.

The boy leaned back and wiped his brow, looking behind him. Kakashi let his eye follow and saw that they were surrounded by a high wall of sand. Which immediately fell and the boy, looked to him before moving away. “Be right back.”

Kakashi watched the boy walk to some strange rocks and come back, cracking his neck.

The boy returned, looking over his shoulder wearily before plopping back down rather ungracefully. He leaned back on his heels and bright green eyes stared at him in amazement. “You sure know how to take several knives to the stomach and not die.” The boy stopped. “Leaf guy.”

Kakashi chuckled. “It's a talent.”

“It's quite the impressive talent.”

“Hmm,” Kakashi let his eyes close.

“Hey! Don't fall asleep!” Kakashi's eyes opened wide as the kid caused serious pain in his stomach. “I'll tell you when you're allowed to sleep.” He said darkly. “And it's not yet.” He heard something ripping and something warm touch his stomach. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Why?”

“So you don't die.”

“You seem to know everything about me already.” He closed his eyes again. “You first.”

“You don't seem to know how this whole 'not dying' thing works.”

“On the contrary. I've done this before. I am a bit of an expert in not dying.” The boy seemed to get closer. He was wrapping something around him.

The boy sighed. “Medic-nin from Suna. Go.”

“You said you weren't.”

“Today I am, just talk.”

He chuckled. “Copy Ninja, Konoha.”

The boy stopped. “You're Kakashi Hatake?”

He smirked. “My reputation precedes me.” He mumbled tiredly.

“Holy Shit...”

Kakashi chuckled. “I'm sure you're mother would cry if she heard you talking like that...” He trailed off.

“Oi, oi, oi! Don't fall asleep yet!” The boy barked. “Not until I tell you!”

A memory flashed in his mind of days of old. He opened his eyes to see panicked green eyes staring down at him.

He closed his eyes. “Yes, Sakura.”

“Shit!” The boy cursed, but it sounded so far away as Kakashi let himself fall into unconsciousness.

III

Kakashi woke with a start. His pulse race as he felt himself pinned to the ground.

“Please don't fight it.” A young, tired voice said. Kakashi's memory threw bits and pieces of information at him as he turned his head to see his young medic, leaning back on his hands looking into a fire. The boy was covered in blood (hopefully, only Kakashi's blood) and sand. It stuck to his hair and his face and everywhere else.

“Tired?”

“It's been five hours. Your people are slow.” He mumbled. “I have to keep you and those fucks over there ensnared and it's very tiring.”

Sand was scattered all over the clearing. Two men were incapacitated in large heaps of sand. One was standing, covered in sand to his cheeks. His eyes were wide with anger. He tried to move, but the sand only gripped him tighter. Sand from the ground slowly collected on his body.

“He's not going anywhere.” The boy yawned, his voice full of exhaustion. He tossed wood on the fire, almost missing.

Kakashi looked down at himself to see that he was also wrapped in sand. “You don't-”

“It's keeps in your body heat, and, not to mention, your small intestine inside your body. You are wrapped the tightest.”

Kakashi nodded. The boy was watching the fire, biting his lip. “Thank you.”

The boy shrugged.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Kakashi spoke again. “I'm guessing you're from Sand.”

The boy didn't look away from the fire. He didn't even crack a smile. He just shrugged. “Yeah.”

Kakashi smiled, “You are quite the little ninja.”

The boy's eyes furrowed, but Kakashi could tell what that meant. “I'm not that great.”

“You saved a dead man from four S-ranked ninja's all on your own?” Kakashi peeked his good eye open to see the boy squirming. “Not to mention you brought the dead man back to life.” He gave the boy a once over. “How old are you?”

The boy looked at him. Making Kakashi gasp.

Those eyes...

Those so bright green eyes seemed to be searching for the answer. “Thirteen.”

Kakashi nodded. “Impressive.” The boy was a horrible liar.

The boy squirmed. “Thanks.”

They fell into silence again. Kakashi must have dozed off because when he opened his eyes, the boy was red faced and beads of sweat rolled down his face. He had to be almost at his end. The sand around Kakashi was looser.

“You okay?”

The boy nodded. They didn't speak until the boy sighed, smiling brightly. “Your team's here.”

Kakashi nodded, eyes widening when he realized his mask was in place. He looked at the boy curiously. “You never did tell me your name.” Kakashi shifted slightly. “Sand boy.”

The boy stared into the fire. “My, my name is-”

“Kakashi!” The loud rustle of trees and slowly people started landing soundlessly in the clearing. Gai came trampling out of the trees like a tornado. “I have come to rescue you, my damsel!”

The boy looked wearily over at Kakashi, who only smiled.

“Yo.”

Gai's head snapped in his direction. “Kakashi-” He took a large step before turning to the others. “He's alive!” He turned back to Kakashi with tears in his eyes.

Sai and Shikamaru dropped to the ground. Shikamaru put his hands on his knees. “How-how is that even-” He stopped. Kakashi looked over Gai's shoulder. Shikamaru was staring at the boy. “Obito?”

Kakashi felt his breath being sucked out of his chest.

Obito? How ironic. The boy grinned up at Shikamaru. “Yo.”

“Obito,” Shikamaru looked around the scene before looking warily at Kakashi. “What are you doing here?”

Obito shrugged. “Saving the Copy Ninja, apparently.” Shikamaru gaped at him. Obito shrugged. Kakashi gave an eye crinkle as what looked like medic nins surrounded him.

“He did a very good job at that.”

The boy’s face lit up.

“But why are you here by yourself?” Shikamaru demanded. “Where's your team?”

“At home, I guess. Sleeping. Painting each others nails?”

Shikamaru sighed. “Dammit, Obito.”

“I'm on a solo mission. It was a B ranked mission, but...I think it's been raised a bit.” Kakashi was able to see the boy trying not to smile.

Shikamaru growled. “B-ranked solo? So that means...” Shikamaru sighed. “You're a Jounin now?”

The boy shrugged nonchalantly. “It's been like a year and half.” Kakashi felt the sand shift as the boy moved out of Kakashi line of vision. “I hope I'm getting compensated properly by the Hokage for this. I charge double for Copy Ninjas.”

Shikamaru sighed, moving to the sand entrapped guy. “Troublesome little shit.”

“It's been like eight hours. You guys are slow.”

The three medic nins, who had been whispering to each other, hovering over him started to face him, hands glowing. His hand weakly broke the sand and waved them off.

“You didn't have to bring field medics for my sake.” He swatted the girl away. “The boy patched me up pretty well.”

“Please don't listen to him.” Obito said, taking a deep breath as the sand rolled off Kakashi. “He's still halfway dead.”

“I like to think halfway alive.”

Gai gathered Kakashi's hands so the medics could get in. Gai's eyes were serious. “I hope you're lying. You're still in pretty bad shape.”

“You should have seen him before.” Obito sighed as Shikamaru detained the men. There was a low whooshing sound as sand filled the air. It swirled around the boy before moving towards a gourd at his side. “I'm surprised I did what I did.” His eyes flashed to Kakashi, “I'm not a very good medic.”

Kakashi gave him a signature eye crinkle as he felt the warmth of the sand slide off him. “You did very well.”

The boy blushed. Kakashi closed his eyes, letting the healing chakra warmth (though not as warm, he had to admit) pass through him. He smiled.

“Seriously?” Shikamaru whispered.

There was a loud grunt and a laugh from Shikamaru. Kakashi opened his eyes as he felt his organs fall into place. The boy was rubbing at the collar of his shirt, glaring at Shikamaru. “His organs are falling out, multiple stab wounds and multiple serious blows to his face. There are more important things to address.”

Kakashi cleared his throat, making both of them jump. The boy-Obito, looked to Shikamaru. “I got to get back to Suna. You guys got this?”

“You can't make it back-”

“No. I'm fine.”

“I insist.” The boy froze as Kakashi pushed the hands of the medic

away and began to stand shakily. Gai was there with a strong arm and he slumped against it. “It's still two days to Suna and you've probably wasted all your chakra.” Obito looked over to Shikamaru who threw his arms up in the air. And moved to join the rest of the recon team on the other side of the clearing.

“No. I really can't-”

“Sometimes the most stubborn people make the most loyal Shinobi.” Kakashi was pretty sure he was quoting Icha Icha, but the boy didn't have to know that.

“Or foolish.” The boy muttered. He bowed deeply to Kakashi. “An honor, Hatake-san.” Kakashi waved him off, feeling slightly out of body. But it could just be the blood loss.

“The honor is all mine, Jounin Obito of the Sand.” He held out his hand. Obito hesitated, before gripping it firmly, smiling brightly. Kakashi started feeling fuzzy inside. Something was happening to his heart. It could have been the medic. But when he looked at this boy, “Perhaps our paths will cross again.”

Obito nodded, grinning like an idiot.

III

Kakashi woke up two days later in the hospital. Immediately he started pulling I.V.s out of his arms, ready to flee the hospital when he froze.

He'd had that same conversation with Sakura right before they-

He yanked the cords to heart monitor out of his chest. He didn't need the readings to give away an old heart broken man escaping from the place that reminded himself so much of her.

ANBU

Chapter Notes

almost fourteen

He'd been back for a week. The first three days his mother wouldn't allow him to leave the house until he told her where all the blood had come from.

She sprayed him down with the hose since she wasn't completely convinced it wasn't his. When she inspected every inch of him inside and out, she let him sleep.

And he slept for four days. Severe chakra depletion.

She was almost fine, almost back to normal when Gaara-jii showed up at their front door with *Shikamaru and Ino* who were there in the Hokage's place to give him a medal and a years supply of instant ramen in gratitude for saving one of his most valued Shinobi.

Her questions were back in full force.

Luckily, Shikamaru-sensei and Gaara weren't saying who and Obito was able to act like he didn't know who the guy was. And Ino had just come because it was Suna; she couldn't pry it out of Shikamaru, which seemed to not be too suspicious.

But what was he going to do with all that ramen?

A letter came the fifth day from Mina only saying

Obito!

He wanted to burn it but couldn't bring himself to.

He just wanted everything to get back to normal.

And Mako trying to punch him in the face seemed vaguely normal.

“You said nothing!? What is wrong with you!?”

Obito was worried that his teammates would let her go. “He-he was dying. He didn't need me-”

“Even. More. Reason!” She struggled against her captors.

Hachiko sighed, letting Mako go. “She's right.”

Temari let her fingers slip as Mako came charging. Obito put up a wall of sand, but Mako ran up and over it. She dived on him, grabbing him in a choke hold.

“You. *Idiot* !”

“My mom's at least happy that my healing was adequate.” This didn't stop Mako.

“Which is quite surprising.” Hachiko said mildly. “You usually can barely heal a sprain.”

Obito forced a sand coffin around Mako, forcing her to release her grip. “Guys-”

“Father-” Mako snorted.

“Kakashi had been stabbed, I counted, like twenty seven times. And that's if they didn't stab the same wound twice. Couldn't worry him about me.”

Mako pointed at him. “You are not allowed to go on solo missions ever again.”

Temari coughed. Making everyone turn and look at her. “Which-might be an issue...” Obito and Mako looked over at their sensei, who was reaching into her lapel. “You two have been accepted to take the ANBU test.”

Mako jumped, breaking the coffin. “But-but Obito's only-”

“He's actually been ready for a year.” Temari said, not looking at a gaping Hachiko. “But he wanted to wait for you.”

Mako looked at Obito, but he ignored her.

Hachiko was shocked. “A-ANBU?” Her voice was quiet, but they all turned to look at her.

“Hachi-” Mako's voice was weak.

“You were going to join ANBU without me?”

“Hachi-chan!” Mako said, throwing her arms up at their teammate. “You-you said you-you liked healing and working with Sakura-san in the hospital-so-so we can do stuff while you're-” Obito put a hand on her shoulder, silencing her.

“ANBU will get you killed.” Hachiko stalked to Mako, staring down at her. It was then that Obito realized how much taller he'd gotten than Mako. And Hachiko. “Killed Mako. Like Shin.”

“Hachi-”

“Shin!”

Obito looked over to Temari, who looked away.

Obito watched as Hachiko raised a hand before dropping it and stomping away.

Mako immediately ran after her.

Temari and Obito stood in silence for a moment before Temari walked over to him, handing him two identical scrolls. “Shin was our fourth member before you.” Temari looked away. “He- got hit with a kunai that pierced his lung. We couldn't get him home fast enough. Hachiko-she was so excited when your mother promised to train you all in healing. She-she didn't want to see it happen again.”

Temari-sensei patted him on the shoulder. “She'll come around. She'll be happy for you. Just give her some time.” She let her hand slip. She turned to walk away and she turned. “I think what you did was right.” She nodded. “If it didn't feel like a good time to tell Hatake, then it wasn't. You've got plenty of time.”

Obito nodded. “Thanks.”

III

Hachiko held up a hand. They were sitting at a restaurant. He had been half writing a letter to Mina (promptly ignoring the whole Kakashi ordeal), half eating. “You guys go and join something stupid and dangerous.” Her voice was clipped and shaky. “And when you come back half way dead, I'll be here to bring you back.” She nodded to herself. “I'll join the hospital staff, but your mother can't save you both.”

Guilt stabbed Obito. He'd have to tell his mother. He opened his

mouth to say something, but Hachiko spun on her heel and stormed off.

Obito looked over to Mako, who was staring at the ground. He ignored her blue and purple eye.“That...could have gone better...” Mako nodded dully.

“But it could have been worse.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a sealed scroll. “For you.” She took it with a mumbled thanks. She then reached into her own flak jacket and pulled out a letter.

“Came this morning. Didn't read it.”

He mumbled his thanks before she walked off silently.

III

Ino was suspiciously absent from the house when he entered. She usually hung around for a month or two, doing Ino things.

His mother was sitting at the kitchen table, strumming her fingers loudly.

“Temari said you had something to show me.”

Obito froze, squishing up his face as he turned to face his mother. “Nothing gets by-”

“What?” She jumped up and cornered him in the hall. “Why did she come all the way-”

“We live on her way-”

“-here to tell me-”

He pulled out the still unopened scroll. She stared at it, mystified. He shrugged, “Open it. See what it says.”

There was a pause before she carefully unwound the scroll.

She was silent for a few moments before Obito prompted her. “Well?”

Her eyes were glossy and bright. Her lips were pursed and her hands were shaking slightly. “Obito...” She smiled brightly and pulled him into a hug. She squeezed him tightly.

He noticed that she was getting shorter than him.

She pulled away, twirling in the kitchen in a similar fashion that she did when Ino was here.

“Haruno Obito!” His mother said with mock seriousness. She slipped out of her chair as he reached for the letter. “We are pleased to inform you of your selection into the highest order of Shinobi that Suna has to offer.”

“It's an acceptance into being able to try out-”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh please, they tell everyone that but if they are going to consider you, you're already in.” She moved away from him as she continued to read. He was on her heels as she slipped from the kitchen. She ducked and dodged his attempts to grab the letter. “Please report to substation 9-Oh!” her eyes were gleaming with excitement, “what's 'substation 9'”

“Mother!” He cornered her and went to reach for the letter but she grabbed his hand, pressed down on a pressure point between his pointer and middle finger, and pushed him down, making him cringe and fall to the floor. “Sounds mysterious!” She waggled her fingers the best she could while holding the parchment. “Please report to Substation 9 in two days for initiation.”

He bit his lip. If he moved, she only pressed down harder, or moved to another pressure point and/or used her strength. He always forgot that she had been a ninja. She was a ninja. And a feared one at that.

She looked away from the letter and blinked. “You'll never survive if you let an old woman like me get the best of you.” she sounded so cheery.

She slowly released him. He fell on his butt. “I could have killed you, if you weren't my mother.”

She rolled her eyes. “Doubt it.”

He shrugged, flexing his wrist. “Crazy wom-”

“Obito.” His mother said softly. He glanced up at her skeptically. Her hands were at her sides, her hands tightly wrapped around his letter. “Obito, I'm very proud of you.” She pursed her lips, “you're so young, yet you've accomplished so much.”

He smiled softly at her. “Thanks.” He picked himself up off the floor and stood square with his mother. His heart almost stopped as he looked down at her.

When had she gotten so small?

She smiled brightly at him, cupping his face. “Congratulations.”

He shrugged. “I figured you'd want to kill me. Getting into ANBU, and all.”

She shook her head. Her eyes were bright again. He felt a lump in his throat. When did she get so small? “No. I'm so proud. You're a big boy and can make his own decisions.” She pulled him down and kissed his forehead. She pulled back and laughed, “When did you get so tall?” she pulled him back a bit, looking him over. “Almost fourteen and already taller than mom.” She shook her head. She ruffled his hair. “But not by much.”

He shrugged as he swallowed the lump. She wasn't much shorter. A few inches maybe, but he still looked down.

She patted his cheek. “Go wash up and go to bed. A new adventure is about to start.” He nodded and quickly moved towards the bathroom, closing the door before looking back.

III

Sakura listened to the water run. She sighed, running a finger through her long hair before moving back to the kitchen. The smile threatening her lips wouldn't go away. She knew she should be worried, but she couldn't help but be so proud. She knew Kakashi would be proud too.

She dumped out her cold tea and thought about making another pot. She brushed it off, setting the letter on the counter before wandering to her room. She focused on the water. Her son had a strict routine in the shower, seven minutes and fifteen seconds since he was eight.

Kakashi was nine minutes and four seconds.

She guessed it was the water shortage.

She knelt next to her bed, pulling out a box. She pulled out a pen and a piece of paper and scribbled a note. *He's made it into ANBU. A little later than he planned, but I think he waited for his team. You'd be so*

proud. He's so wonderful.

She paused, swallowing thickly.

Perhaps, since I'm such a coward, he'll find you. He'll tell you everything.

I'm so, so sorry.

The shower cut off. She slid the letter in the box-a box filled with so many identical, unmailed letters-and slid the box back under the bed. She was up and moving towards her dresser as Obito exited the bathroom.

“Obito.” she called. He paused, looking over to her questionably. She smiled warmly. Kakashi would be so proud. “I want to give you something.” She opened the drawer and moved some of her clothes. She pulled out a white, porcelain mask. “Now, I don't expect you to use it or anything, but I feel you should have it.” Obito was next to her now, his hair dripping slightly, a towel tight around his waist. He was lankier than a man in ANBU should be. He lacked the proper power (though not necessarily strength). But he had speed, quick reflexes and his father's knack for strategy. She handed over the white and red mask “It was the White Fang's.” She grinned at his shock and slightly questionable gaze. “Your grandfather's.”

He gasped. She handed it over and he took it gingerly, eyes shining with wonder.

“I remember your father wanting to throw it away-but couldn't get the courage to do it.” She stood back to survey her son. He held the relic so carefully in his hands, turning it over and memorizing each scratch and chip. “So I took it.” She crossed her arms. “He wasn't-is not a very...sentimental person.” Besides his books, and his few pictures…

Sakura paused, turning. “One more thing.” He watched her curiously as she went to her bed, crouching down and grasping under the bed. She let out an excited noise as her fingers wrapped around it.

“This was your father’s.” She stood, holding out the tattered tanto. “He gave it to me when…” She paused, placing the sword in his hands, “this was his weapon while he was in ANBU.

“I never actually saw him use it, and it’s dull now. And the sheath needs replaced, but-”

Obito did something he never did-he bowed deeply to her. “Thank-

thank you, Mom.”

She waved it off. “It's not a big deal-”

The next thing she knew she was pulled into a bear hug. “Thank you. I will do them both proud.”

She patted his back. “I know you will.” she pried herself back. “Now go put some pants on.”

He blushed crimson, quickly back away. He slipped the mask on his head sideways before exiting the bedroom, scooping up his clothes he left in the hall as he went.

Warmth spread through her chest as she heard his door click shut. She shook her head fondly before eying the floor under the bed. She listened for her son before crouching by the bed again and pulling out a fresh piece of paper.

III

Obito, freshly pants, collapsed on the bed. He fingered the mask on his face before pulling it off to properly examine it.

“So this was my Grandfather's...” he murmured. It did look old-but not that old. It had seen quite a bit of life. Faded blood stains that you could never get out without repainting. Scratches, some deeper than others. But the original paint looked fresh. “I wonder if it's blood?” he studied the wolf's face for a few moments before slipping it back on his head sideways.

He bent over the bed and fumbled through his pants pockets. The letter from Mina was still sealed, though slightly crumpled. He knew, knew, what it was about. But he didn't want to know.

He sighed, calming the butterflies in his stomach before slipping the white mask over his face and tearing open the letter.

Obito,

Things have been crazy. I can't say too much, but 'apparently' the famous Copy Ninja was tattered back together from some strange kid from Sana who uses sand.

I haven't been around too much, I don't want to rouse suspicion, but from what mom has said, he's been asking dad all about this Suna kid. But that

could be dad over exaggerating. He's worried about what would happen if Kakashi puts the pieces together. He doesn't know if he'll have a heart attack or just die from shock. He doesn't know if that's before or after he goes to Suna (remember this is Uzumaki Naruto we're talking about).

He's already out of the hospital, (though Lady Tsunade has put a bounty on his head to bring him back since he's still pretty injured) and he came to find me!

Asked me if he was the same boy that was always hanging around me. Before I could say anything he just walked away.

He's so strange.

Anyways, you HAVE to tell me how it was! I bet it was pretty anticlimactic, to be honest.. Well, the whole saving his life not, but after with him all...not dead and whatever.

Write soon, but come back to Konoha sooner! You haven't been here in ages! I bet you're pretty tall-I'm getting tall-I'm running out of paper.

~Mina

Regret filled him as Obito sighed. So he's asking about me...Obito reached under the bed and pulled out his small old shoebox. He released the seal on it and tossed Mina's letter in there with all the rest. He looked up at the sword that leaned against the door frame. *Well...I sure didn't get his anti-sentimentalism...* he smiled at his small-well, large-box of letters.

He'd write her back tomorrow, though he hated to tell her he'd probably wouldn't be back in Konoha for a while.

III

Kakashi leaned back against the wall. He was perched outside the Hokage's office. He figured he'd give him another forty five minutes before slipping through the window.

He pulled open his book and stared at the pages. But every time he blinked, he saw that damn Suna kid and his bright green eyes.

“Hmmm...” He leaned his head back and closed his good eye, letting his mind focus on what his Sharingan eye saw. It wasn't much, but there was something about that kid that was familiar.
“Hmm...Obito...” he usually hated people with his old teammates

name-he always felt that they couldn't hold it properly. Not like the real Obito.

But that kid...

“Hmmm...”

“Dammit Kakashi-sensei! It's been two hours! Hurry up and give that report!” Naruto was screaming from the window.

“Hmmm...”

“Don't make me get my clones!” Naruto's threat, though not a hollow one, wasn't very threatening.

Perhaps our paths will cross again... Before the Hokage could do any damage to himself, Kakashi jumped down and walked casually to the window.

Obito.

Pink

Obito pulled down his mask as they rounded the bend, the village coming into sight. It had started drizzling, causing them to pick up the pace. Mako adjusted herself on his arm; shifting the skimpy dress she wore before leaning into more intimately. Her shoes clacked loudly against the ground. He smiled at the guards weakly who winked at him and chuckled as they walked past.
"Are they laughing at my hair?" He pulled gently at his pink locks. Despite being such an eyesore, the pink hair was a decent disguise. No one took him for the silver haired Shinobi of the Sand, which allowed him to walk right through the gates of villages without so much as a second glance. But it made him feel like a girl. Especially the way his mother ooh-ed and ahh-ed over it. She even went out and bought him this dark green yukata that had sakura blossoms all over the bottom.

It was a girl's Yukata .

"No." Mako said sweetly. She was elegantly dressed as well; her kimono a vibrant black with red dragons dancing up the arm. Despite her short brown hair, she looked dainty. "You're walking through the village with a beautiful woman."

Obito raised a brow, looking down at her. "What? You're a beautiful-"

"Watch it."

He chuckled, tugging her closer. "Do you know where we're going?"

Mako nodded. "The compound is on the other side of the village. On the southwest side."

Obito straightened, craning his neck. "There's a lot of people here. Festival?"

Mako let out a low hum. "I didn't think there was." Loud cheering erupted from the east.

"There is something. That's for sure."

They headed down the main street until they came to an inn. "Let's get a room before we start."

Obito nodded. Guiding Mako through the inn doors.

III

Their target was 48 year old Heigo Masuda. A man who had a nasty habit of stealing Wind country goods and bringing them to Rain to sell at a high price.

Their job was to take care of the problem. The man lived in a small gated compound that had guards littering almost the whole village. They didn't seem to be much of a threat, but they wanted to kill only their target.

They made their way silently across rooftops, sliding to the ground, pressing against the compound walls. The moon was shining brightly, giving them plenty of light. Obito looked around the corner, Obito holding up two fingers, silently halting Mako. Two guards stood at the entrance, lazily talking to each other. They would be easy to incapacitate.

"Kid." Barely audible but it rang in his ears loudly. He felt her tense. Two more guards were coming around the opposite corner. He flicked his hand and she silently dashed to the other side. He watched as her front elbow crashed into one man's face, sending her body moving forward. Using that momentum she spun, sticking her leg out and crashing her foot into the other man's face. They both fell with soft thumps. Obito waited for the other two to round the corner where he struck the first with an inverted strike to the neck, and the second striking in the solar plexus hard. Two more thumps in the silent night.

They cautiously moved forward. They dodged guards and other residents with ease, only stopping once when they heard an uproar from some where in the distance. Obito took a shaky breath when they reached Masuda's lodgings. Mako didn't wait for his signal. She slipped up the side of the house to the roof silently. Obito hated this part. He stood in the deep shadows waiting for her. He adjusted his mask and began to fidget with his small gourd strapped to his waist. It was twice the size of his fist with just enough sand to cover him if need be. Or, as they might need tonight, a quick get away.

He listened and heard nothing. But nothing could be heard over the sound of his blood pulsing in his head as he counted the seconds she was gone.

It felt like an hour, but was only minutes, when Mako slipped back down next to him. She nodded and they slipped back out of the residence, leaving only a few grains of sand.

III

“I think you were wrong.” Mako called over the onsen wall. Obito sank deep into the water.

“I'm never wrong.”

She snorted. “I think...I think the chuunin exams are going on here.”

Obito hummed, closing his eyes. “Is that so?”

There was a loud splash. Obito didn't bother moving. “You know she's here.” He shrugged. “Obito!”

He opened an eye wearily. “What?”

“You should go find her?”

He rolled his eye, closing it. “She's busy.”

“Oh, please. Not for her hero from sand.”

Obito ignored her tone. “She's with her team.”

“She'd ditch them for you.”

“Mako.”

“Ba-bi-to.” She grabbed his shoulders, shaking him playfully. “You know you want to.”

Obito rolled forward, dipping under the water in a flip. Even under water he heard her squawk as she fell in. He surfaced, flinging his hair in her direction. She did not look amused.

“Ma-ko-chan!” He grabbed her, shaking her slightly “Do you like that?” He let go, not looking at her flushed face. “Go back to your side.” There was a part of him that felt that this should be weird. That he should feel somewhat awkward around her.

Mako lifted herself out of the hot water. Obito turned back around. He heard her footsteps as she made her way to the entrance. “But...you do want to see her, right?”

“No.” He said firmly. She chuckled as she walked away.

It had been years since he'd last seen Mina. Yes, they sent letters back

and forth but they had become farther and farther apart as the months went by. Shorter in length (which was saying something for Mina). Obito wasn't even sure if he'd recognize her if he saw her on the streets.

Obito sighed, sinking deeper into the water.

“You should go find her.”

“No.”

III

“Oh my! Your hair!” Obito wanted to murder Mako. They needed to leave. But no. Instead of putting as much distance between them and Rain, he was standing there awkwardly in the streets, in a dark green yukata as Mina squealed in delight, standing on tiptoe to pull at his pink hair. He had his mask up and his glasses 'shielding his eyes from the sun.' And Mina from his blush. But he knew she had to sense the butterflies trying to escape his stomach as she dropped down to her heels. Her beautiful blue eyes shone with amusement. “So...you guys-are here for the exams?”

“Just traveling.” He tried to say coolly. He hoped she didn't think he sounded like half the idiot that he felt when he said it.

“I'm sure.” She winked before taking a step back. Obito locked his knees.

She was just so pretty. Her face was slender, her neck was long. He wanted to touch the soft wisp of hair that escaped her messy ponytail. He had to keep his hands in his sleeves, crossed over his chest, gripping his forearms. He couldn't really tell much more about her-her chuunin uniform left everything else to his imagination.

Her toes are adorable at least.

“Why did you dye it?”

He shrugged. “Classified?”

Her impish smile was making his heart beat faster. “Nope.”

“It is.”

“He lost a bet.” Obito almost jumped out of his skin at Mako bouncing behind him. She giggled. He turned and lifted his glasses and glared.

“We need to leave soon.” She looked behind her. “Real soon.” She nodded to a group of guards. They were staring at him, talking to themselves.

“I told you that an hour ago!” He hissed at her. Mina made a soft coughing sound, making him turn around quickly. He grabbed Mina's shoulder, turning her, fingers tingling, forcing her to walk with him towards the gate, Mako in tow. “Listen, I'm sorry-”

“I get it. Confidential. I never saw you.” He smiled under his mask. She had nice shoulders.

“Thanks.” He said softly. She smiled.

“Obi-!” Mako hissed, but Obito had already felt it. He was spinning on the ball of his right foot, a Kunai slipping from his sleeve and-

A hand grabbed his wrist, a finger pressing hard into his wrist making him drop the kunai. He grabbed his attacker's lower forearm and ducked in, pulling the person over him. The attacker easily flipped, still holding Obito's arm, spun him around, pinning the young man's arm behind his back, a kunai pressing flat against his neck. Obito jammed his left elbow into the attackers ribs, grabbing the falling kunai pointing it at the attacker.

Fingerless gloves caught his wrist. There was a low chuckle. “Not bad.”

Obito froze. He looked up to see Kakashi smiling at him. “So you are Mina's little friend.” His eyes flicker and Kakashi's eye crinkled. “What did you do to your hair?”

Obito gawked. His face overheated as he opened and closed his mouth but no words came out. Kakashi let go of him, his hands falling limply to his sides.

Kakashi picked at his hair. “I almost didn't recognize you, with your hair, though I'm not entirely sure what color your hair is originally, a dirty blood maybe, but as you walked away, I recognized your chakra.” Kakashi might have attempted to wink. He leaned in with his masked side of his face. “Almost had me.” His voice was almost a sing-song.

Kakashi chuckled. “I was never able to properly thank you, young man. You saved my life.” Kakashi ruffled his hair.

His *pink* hair.

Obito opened his mouth to speak when Kakashi's eyes widened. “I know!” He exclaimed softly, tapping his fist into his open palm. He reached down and pulled something out of the pocket on his hip. It was a small orange book. “For my savior.” Kakashi smiled, holding out the orange book, bowing deeply. With shaking hands, Obito gripped the tattered book. “This is my prized possession. Keep it safe.”

“Hata-”

“Wait!” Kakashi snatched the book out of his hands and flipped it open, pulling out something from the book. A photograph. Kakashi winked. “Can't have my bookmark.”

Obito's eyes saw a flash of pink. And he felt sick. A picture in his most prized possession. Kakashi was talking but he didn't hear it. *He still loves you mom...*

“Hatake-sama-” Obito bowed. “There is something I must-”

“You better get out of here.” Kakashi's voice dropped suddenly. Obito snapped back to reality. He saw the guards walking quickly towards them.

“Obito, we have to go.” Mako said quickly.

The book was back in his hands. “Good luck, Obito-kun.”

Mako dragged him away and soon they were running out of the village, the orange book clutched tightly in his fingers.

III

They stopped in a small village for the night half way to Suna. Obito got first shower and scrubbed, with sand, the pink out of his hair. He tried not to think about what happened. He tried not to think of Mina, and how pretty she was. He tried not to think about Kakashi. About his mother. About the photograph.

Kakashi .

Kakashi is still in love with Mom.

He'd never thought about it. He was always so focused on her-he-

He punched the tiled wall, making it crack.

“You better not be breaking shit in there!”

Obito turned off the water and grabbed his towel.

“I should have told him. I should have said-”

“You didn't have time. We had to get out of there or we'd be dead.” He wrenched open the door to see Mako standing there, frowning. “You'll tell him next time.”

Obito brushed past her, towards his pack, pulling out his regular clothes. He quickly dressed and rolled on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He listened to the water, his mind running blank. Eventually he rolled over, grabbing his pack, pulling out the tattered book.

He frowned as he flipped it over. “Icha Icha?” He opened the front cover, reading the flap. He stopped reading after four sentences.

He blinked. And just stared blankly at the page.

“What?” He sat up, flipping the book open to a random page and skimmed.

He set the book down in his lap and stared at it.

This is his most prized possession?

“So, you're going to read it?” He looked up at Mako, fresh out of the shower, not sure what to say. He looked back down at it, then to her and then slowly closed it.

“Mako, it's porn.”

She stared at him for a moment. “What?”

He turned to her. “This is porn.”

She blinked before she burst out laughing. He watched her as she collapsed on her bed, in nothing more than a towel, laughing loud enough for anyone in the little village could hear.

“That's-that's fantastic!” She howled between breaths.

His lips quirked. She shook her head, looking down at the book. The book's spine was almost non existent it had been opened so much. The pages were loose and seemed to threaten to pop out of their seams. What looked like flickers of blood littered the outside pages. This book

seemed to have seen a lot of action. Over a lot of years.

Obito started giggling, before he too laughed all out.

“There comes a time in a boy's life where he must have a heart to heart with his father-” Mako choked out. Her words sent her into a fit of giggles. “And so your father just handed you a porny book and said 'this is my prized possession!' Priceless!”

Obito smiled, running his fingers lightly across the bind.

Too bad he doesn't know.

III

Obito placed the book (he was half way done) inside the bag as he slipped his mask off as his hand grabbed the front door. He slipped inside and started pulling off his shoes when he heard his mother.

“Oh good! You're home! What luck! Dinner is almost ready!” She poked her head out of the kitchen and smiled.

He threw his shoes in the corner, his footsteps quiet as he entered the kitchen. He sat down at the small table. She was bustling over a large pot, moving from the cabinets, to the spices, and the refrigerator and the pot, humming softly.

“How was your mission?”

“Classified.” He said distantly, watching her, trying to keep his mind from going to the picture.

She sighed dramatically. “Of course! But-did something happen? Your hair's not pink anymore...” She tried not to sound hurt.

“Classified.” He watched her pour something into the pot. He wondered where Kakashi would fit into this scene. He tried to find out where he'd be in the kitchen. Would he lean against the door frame? Maybe the counter, holding his book, making small comments at his mother prattled on about something at the hospital. Obito stared at the table.

We'd have to get a chair out of storage .

Before he could stop himself, the words stumbled out of his mouth. “Mom, have you ever talked to Kakashi?” His mom froze. He swallowed. “Since...me?”

Time stopped in the small kitchen. Eventually she shook her head before continuing her work. She moved towards the fridge. “Why do you ask?” her voice was clipped and guarded.

The picture burned in his mind. “I'm just,” he shrugged, “curious.”

She didn't speak for a while. He watched her pull out some kind of root, chop it finely and toss it in the pot. She didn't look back at him.

It felt like a rock was nestling itself in his stomach as the air in the room tensed. “Well?”

“No.” She said curtly, setting her ladle down hard on the counter. “Not since we moved.”

“You-you could, you know.” He tried to make it sound casual, but it came out so forced he mentally kicked himself. “You could, write to him...tell him...you know...you're alive.”

She spun around. “Obito-”

“And-” He swallowed thickly, the words rushing out of his mouth so quick he almost didn't catch them.
“Andyoudon'thavetotellhimaboutme.” He looked away from his mother, who's eyes started to shine. “If...if you don't want to that is...” He shrugged, looking down at the table. “If-if it means anything.”

Her hands were on his face, forcing him to look at her. “Oh, Obito...” Her eyes were shining, and she was biting her lip. “There is just a lot that you don't understand.”

“Why don't you tell me?” He tried to pull his face away, but she held it firmly. “I mean-he doesn't even know if you're dead-”

“It's complicated.”

He rose to his feet, making her fingers slip. “If this is that bullshit about that Uchiha guy, then you shouldn't even let that bother you.” He said bitterly, moving to the stove, picking up the label and stirring the contents that were threatening to overflow. “I could take him.” He looked back at her quickly before looking back at the stove, turning the burner down.

“Sasuke is not someone to be taken lightly.”

Obito laughed bitterly. “And neither am I! I'm the son of Haruno

Sakura! I not only have super strength, but I know tactical strategy better than anyone else in this village.” He gently placed the ladle down, turning to her. “And I'm the Kazekage's apprentice. If it came to a battle in the sand, I would not lose.”

“And if you were somewhere else?” In two steps she was in his face. He took a step back, his heels pressing against the stove. “He is older, and has much more experience than you do. And if I hear you are starting fights with Sasuke-” Tears started rolling down her face. “And you died-”

He stood straight as a rod. “I wouldn't die.”

“Men have died by his hands. I would die if I heard my baby was slaughtered by him.” She looked away, pressing her lips tightly before looking back at him. “If Kakashi found out that you-about-that we have been here, Because of him. Because I was trying to protect us. And him. He'd try to kill Sasuke for destroying his opportunity to raise son. His blood.” She took a deep breath. Obito felt that she wasn't really talking about Sasuke anymore. After a few moments she spoke very softly. “We couldn't stay in Konoha because you wouldn't have made it to three days old. And whether you were alive or dead your father would have fought in your honor. And he would have died. He would’ve died.” She took a shaky breath. “Because that is how Kakashi is. Loyal to the end.”

“You don't know he would've died.” Obito said just as lowly.

She took a step back and he took a heavy breath. “I didn't want to take that chance.” She sighed deeply. “And now it's too late.”

He reached behind him and shut off the heat. He pulled her into a tight hug. “It's never too late.”

She returned his hug with a tight one. “I may have made mistakes with you. With us. But it was my judgment call. It's my decision. And it's too late to try to fix things.”

“It's never too late, Mom.” He whispered again, rubbing circles on her shoulder blades. After a few minutes, he pulled back, “Come on, let's eat.”

She took a step back and looked at him. “What brought this on?”

He turned quickly, moving to pull bowls out of the cabinets. “Nothing.”

“Obito.” She said in a warning voice.

“It's-it's classified.”

She gripped him hard in the shoulder. “No it's not.”

“Mother-”

“Haruno Obito-” She looked at his face and gasped. He wished he had his mask up. “You saw him didn’t you?”

His pause said everything.

“Did-did you,”

“No!” He looked away. “I didn't-” Which was true, technically.

She narrowed her eyes, “You will tell me the truth.”

“I was-we-Mom, that really *is* classified.” He was a head taller than him but she seemed to tower over him. “We were sent to Rain to take care of something and on our way out we saw him.” He said quickly. “We couldn't stop, we had to leave or else-” He didn't finish. She closed her eyes, her shoulders shaking.

She hadn't moved. “Would you have?”

“Would I have what?” He looked up at her from mouthfuls of food.

“Talked to him.”

He didn't hesitate. “The next time I see him, I will tell him my name.” He looked back at his food. “My full name.” He shrugged. “I don't think it's fair to him.” His hands were shaking. “That he has a little family here and he doesn't know about it. What he does with that information is up to him, but I think he has the right to it.” He didn't look up at her. He heard her move around the kitchen, and the chair opposite of him scratched against the hardwood floor.

“If I was a stronger person, I would do the same.” She whispered.

And they ate in silence.

III

Kakashi trudged up the stairs to his apartment, breathing in the fresh Konoha air. Another chuunin exam down...He exhaled as he reached

the top of the stairs. *And certainly an interesting one.* He wasn't sure which was better. Mina-chan's face getting caught with some boy, the boy realizing he was caught with a girl, or the look of utter embarrassment as he touched his pink hair.

Kids, he smiled to himself, walking down the hall. *It must not be his real hair-*

His thoughts stopped when he spotted a small parcel on his doorstep. It was about two feet long, and slightly lumpy. It was a deep brown paper lightly tied.

He scooped it up. He unclenched his hands as his fingers almost went through the paper. He watched it skeptically as he opened his door and slid in.

He flicked on the lights and unwrapped the paper, freezing at the sight.

It was a single Sakura branch, covered in bloomed blossoms. He ran light fingers over the petals, his heart clenching.

“Sakura...” He moved quickly to the kitchen, looking for something to put the small branch in. He almost thought of dumping Mr. Ukki when he found an old dusty vase. He placed the package on the counter and rinsed out the vase. He filled it almost to the brim and looked at the branch. He dumped out almost all the water and set the vase down. With tender hands, he scooped up the branch and slid it into the vase, careful of its blossoms. He examined it for a while and tightened his lips. It was almost perfect.

He grabbed the paper and started to crumple it up, pausing as something hit his toes. He opened the paper and raised a brow.

“Sand?”

Hospitals

Chapter Notes

fifteen

Sakura waved good-bye to Doctor Tanade on her way out of the hospital, humming merrily to herself. She had always envisioned herself taking over the hospital in Konoha once Tsunade finally retired. *But...* Two nurses gave small bows as they walked past in the courtyard out front. She returned their bows. *This wouldn't be too bad either.* She wasn't far from running it. Tanade always came to her for advice.

But did Sakura really want to run the hospital? She enjoyed working with poisons and training new recruits and helping out wherever she could. And running the hospital would mean it would leave her very little time to talk to patients. And the doctors and nurses would have to treat her differently.

Sakura stopped at the grocery on the way home, her mind whirling with all the administration headache that would come with a high position of power, even the hospital. As she made it back to her street, Sakura felt run down. *Running the hospital would suck.*

“Sakura-sensei!” Sakura looked up at the sound of heavy footfalls.

Hachiko.

Her mind slowed with the three syllables as the girl came running up to her. She was pale, her clothes ripped and disheveled. Her fingers clawed Sakura's arm, smearing blood on Sakura's white shirt.

This is it.

Groceries slipping from her hand.

“Sakura-sensei! Obito! He-” Sakura didn't wait for her to explain; she marched past Hachiko, the girl following at her heels. Sakura’s heart raced faster and faster until she realized that she was sprinting towards the hospital.

She slammed the doors open to the quiet entry way. “Where is Obito?” her voice boomed.

“He's in surgery.” Hachiko said meekly, her voice weak and strained. Sakura changed direction, her footfalls matching the pounding of her heart. She felt almost out of body as Hachiko listed off all her worst fears. “...Severe blood loss, excess lacerations, blunt force trauma to the head...”

Sakura tuned her out as she picked up on her son's chakra. She felt too calm as she burst into the unit, nurses, doctors and surgeons all running to get out of her way. She only stopped right outside his door. She heard hushed murmurings and the sound of machines beeping frantically.

“Sakura-sensei.” Hachiko whispered at her side. “He was healed in the field.” She paused for a moment. “And I met them right outside wind and kept him alive until we got home.”

“Do, exactly as I say.” Sakura said in a low, calm voice. “Hachiko!” She barked, before barging in the room.

III

Sakura sat listening to the heart monitor beep softly. She listened as her baby's breathing was slightly erratic, but his own; he'd been taken off the ventilator hours before. She held his hand as she stroked the small amount of hair that stuck out from his bandages.

They shaved most of it to heal the deep gash in his head.

She watched transfixed at his chest as it slowly rose and fell. They almost had to do a skin graph to cover the hole in his chest. She wiped a tear as she let her hand run down his bandaged cheek. “Three centimeters, son.” She whispered. “Three centimeters and you wouldn't have come back to me.” She took a very shaky breath.

“Ma...ko?”

Sakura jumped, letting out a loud sob as she heard Obito speak. He was struggling to open his eyes, only successfully opening one as his heart monitor spiked. He tried to move, but Sakura grabbed his shoulder and lightly pressed him back down on the bed.

“How-”

“She's alright, she's alright.” Sakura whispered. She started running her hands through his hair again. “You saved her. She's safe. She brought you home to me.” She didn't wipe her tears away as his hand

gently squeezed hers.

He smiled, letting out a wheezy breath as his eye unfocused. “Hmm...” Was all he said before he slipped away.

III

Kakashi listened for the sounds of his dogs, following their lead. “This way!” He called out to the recon medics. He heard the dogs barking manically. They must be getting close.

It was Zabuza all over again.

A small genin squad on a C ranked mission that turned violently A. And from the intel Naruto received, it might even be S ranked.

And before Kakashi left, Naruto had gotten word that Suna had sent aid.

Kakashi sped up, blocking the thoughts of who the aid was as the medic nin struggled to keep pace. From the emergency call, their Jounin was probably already dead.

The dogs grew silent. Kakashi almost froze as he felt the wind shift. The dogs started to whine before howling. Kakashi jumped from tree to tree, eyes narrowing at splintered wood and the smell of fresh dirt filled his nostrils.

He found himself in a newly formed clearing. “Here!”

Kakashi landed, eyes widening. The raw smell of iron overtook the dirt as he inspected the clearing. It looked like a tornado had passed through. Trees were uprooted and the ground upheaved. Giant splinters of trees dripped with sap and blood. The jounin leader, a young man Kakashi had never met, was hanging limply against a tree, his hiate drenched in his own blood.

Kakashi's heart stopped.

Three mangled corpses-one was pinned to a tree with another tree, one had a shuriken sticking out of his head while one had the shiny whites of his arm bones poking out of his skin. In the far corner was what looked like a melting ball. Kakashi held a hand up as the medics dropped to the ground.

Kakashi struggled to breathe, “Sand.”

“Suna,” one of the medics whispered.

One of the medics let out a cry as sand stirred at their feet. Kakashi took a few cautious steps, aware that the sand was sticking to his feet like tar. His dogs were whining softly, almost drowned out by cries of children.

Alive .

Despite Kakashi's heart screaming at him to run, despite every instinct that told him to *hurryhurryhurry* he took cautious step by cautious step. As he entered the sand sphere he held his breath, bracing himself for the worst.

His nausea quickly was overcome with relief.

Two genin sat huddled in one corner of the sphere, clutching each other with white knuckles as they watched one brave genin trying to wrap their savior's wounds.

Kakashi's heart dropped.

Their savior, Obito of the Sand, was whiter than paper. He was on his knees, his arm outstretched as sand poured from his gourd. It moved around them, on him, as his unfocused eyes staring into nothing. His body spasmed violently, splattering blood on the boys he saved. The brave genin was trying to cover the severe hole in the side of Obito's neck with sand and was crying.

“Don't, die, don't die...please don't die...” The genin chanted. Kakashi called for the medics, who came running. He never took his eyes off the Suna boy. He watched as Pakkun moved forward, sniffing carefully before licking his open palm.

Kakashi carefully moved towards the genin, slowly reaching for him.

He screeched. “No, no, no, no!” He tried to cover Obito’s body with his own. Kakashi took a deep breath before pulling the boy away. “It's okay. Help is here.” He murmured. The boy went still as a medic jumped in the ball.

Obito's breath was ragged. So faint.

The genin started sobbing, trying to pull free of Kakashi's grasp. “I have to help him. I have to save him! He saved-”

“Shhhh...” Kakashi pulled him away as the five medics surrounded the Suna boy. Kakashi pulled the boy into the corner with his teammates and watched, mesmerized, as the medic's glow filled the bowl.

Bull let out a low howl and soon, his whole pack was howling in unison.

III

“This is the longest I've ever seen you stay in a hospital freely, Hatake.” Kakashi didn't look up from the immaculate white floor. When he closed his eyes, he saw the red of the boy's blood seeping out of his wounds.

But that was eighteen hours ago.

Kakashi sent the dogs back to Konoha, warning Tsunade that they would be arriving. It would have been a slow trek back to Konoha if, once the medic's cleared him for movement, Kakashi hadn't grabbed the cold boy close to himself and teleported back to Konoha. Tsunade was waiting for them at the gates. Once seeing the mangled boy, her eyes hardened eyes misted slightly before she held her shoulders back and barked at Kakashi to follow.

He'd been sitting outside the ICU ever since.

“You saved his life.” Kakashi nodded, not wanting to look up at Tsunade in fear he'd see Obito's blood still staining her clothes. “Hatake!” Kakashi looked up at the order. Tsunade was covered in blood, Kakashi felt his stomach swirl and spin. He looked back down at the ground, taking large gulps of air. *If he had lost that much more, certainly- “* Kakashi...” Tsunade was crouching in front of him now. She took his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. He thought vaguely of the last time she did that. In his living room after his father had-

No...it had been after Rin-

“You saved him, Kakashi.” Tsunade said so softly. “He is alive.” His throat closed up as he rubbed his masked face. “You found him, you brought him medics and you brought him here.” She smiled. “He's alright. He's going to be alright.”

Tsunade stood. “Come.” Kakashi listened to her feet march away, pausing, waiting. “I'm waiting,” He slowly ambled to his feet. He followed her numbly, feeling the boy's weak chakra behind the closed

doors. Tsunade was pulling off her bloodied coat. By the time she shoved him into her office, she didn't look like she got out of a twelve hour surgery. “Sit.”

He did as he was told. She rounded her desk pulling out a large Sake bottle and two cups. She poured one and shoved it in his direction. “Drink.”

Unconsciously, he pulled down his mask and took a long swig. The alcohol burned in his empty stomach, making him feel slightly less numb. He had barely put the saucer down when Tsunade poured him another. “Drink.”

Again, he did as he was told. He placed the cup down and Tsunade filled it. He didn't have to be told this time.

Slowly he took a shaky breath and leaned back, letting the alcohol swim in his head.

They were silent.

“Why?” Kakashi wasn't surprised at the question. But he was surprised that he was the one that asked. “Why do I care what happened to that kid, Tsunade-sama?” He sighed softly, continuing his soliloquy while waiting for a response. “Is it because I'm afraid of someone else dying?” She said nothing and he shook his head, “I don't feel that it's just that. Ever since that time-” his mind flashed to the thirteen year old boy covered in sand and blood, “he's always been in the back of my mind. There are plenty of kids his age in this village and others.”

Why him?

“Maybe it’s his pretty face.”

He let out a small snort. “At first I thought it was because he's Mina's special friend, but...I'm drawn to him.” He looked up to the Fifth Hokage. Her eyes were misting over again. Her hands clenched together. She took a deep breath.

“Kakashi, Obito-”

“Tsunade-sama!” Shizune burst into the office. “He's relapsing.”

“Shit...” Tsunade was on her feet, stalking out the door.

“Is there anything I can-”

Tsunade wheeled around and looked at him for a moment. She nodded. “He needs blood. Come on.”

Kakashi followed close to her heels.

III

Kakashi kept his eyes closed and his mind blank as he squeezed his fist. He ignored the pricking feeling of the needle in his arm. He ignored Tsunade's barking orders and the frantic sounds of the nurses and doctors moving around him. And he ignored the beeps and the ragged breathing because he hated how it reminded him of everyone who had died before him.

His father. Obito. Rin. Sensei. *Sakura.* He peaked his eyes open to see the tube running blood from him to Obito.

He gritted his teeth in determination.

This boy would not die.

III

Kakashi sat in the window, one leg dangling out the sill. It was his escape route, but he also thought the room smelled too much like antiseptics.

It had been seventy three hours since Obito had been brought to Konoha and he was finally out of ICU, dozing lightly.

The kid's face was all bandaged up, but Kakashi was sure of one thing.

His hair is not pink.

Kakashi froze as the boy let out a small moan. Kakashi hadn't realized he'd moved until he was at the boy's side, gripping his hand, as if he was keeping the boy in the realm of the living.

Kakashi watched as his eyes fluttered open. Bright green eyes looked blankly around until they focused on him. His pupils expanded until the green was only a thin line.

Obito gripped his hand weakly.

“Welcome back.” He let out a laugh. Obito weakly squeezed his hand again. “It's been three days.

“You gave us quite a scare.”

Obito shifted, trying to sit up, but Kakashi patted his hand. “Save your strength, you're safe.”

“The kids-”

“They're safe. A little mangled, scarred, but alright. They've come to see you every day.”

“I couldn't save-”

“It's not your fault.” Kakashi said quickly. “It is the life of a shinobi. He died protecting his team. That is the most honorable death.” Kakashi gripped his hand and shook his head. “But not for you, Obito.” He had the urge to ruffle his hair if it wasn't wrapped in so much gauze. “You're too young to be foolishly throwing yourself into danger like that.”

Obito seemed to try to laugh, but it came out as a wet cough. Kakashi tried to not think of why it was wet. He patted the boy's hand. “You did good, Obito.

“I knew another Obito. He told me once “those that fail a mission are trash, but those that fail their friends are worse than trash.” Kakashi smiled, “I wonder what that makes you? Saving those from another village.

“I was there.” Obito winced. “Why wouldn't I?”

Kakashi's heart warmed. “My Obito would be proud you share a name.”

Kakashi thought the boy would snort, or roll his eyes, but he just stared at him. Like he was peering into his soul. Kakashi let out an awkward cough, patting the boy's hand before setting it back down on the bed. “I'll leave you to rest.”

Kakashi took a step back, and went towards the window when the boy's slurred voice stopped him.

“You proud of me?” Kakashi turned to see Obito struggling to set up but gave up. His heart rate monitor was beeping frantically, he was breathing heavy as he stared at Kakashi with those green eyes. He nodded, “are you proud of me?” There was something in his voice that made Kakashi answer.

“You saved the lives of three people from a village that was not your own. You almost died.” Kakashi shrugged. “Of course I'm proud of you. I think you're an idiot, but I'm proud.”

The boy's face split into a serene smile. Obito closed his eyes and Kakashi watched him fall asleep, the smile on his face not falling as he was swept into oblivion.

III

At the sound of quick footsteps, Kakashi was out the window, leaving nothing but a gentle breeze in his wake.

III

Gaara showed up at her door telling her Obito was in critical condition . *In Konoha.*

He'd stopped on his way back from a mission to save three young genin who's sensei had already been killed in action. He'd saved the genin but was in ICU

They were out of the village in twenty minutes.

The three day journey to Konoha was full of anguish and fearing for the worst. Was she going to have to carry her baby out of the same hospital dead that she carried him out of alive fifteen years ago? She forced her tears back as she pushed on.

That wasn't going to happen.

They made it to Konoha in record time. Tsunade and Naruto met them at the gate as the sun rose. Tsunade didn't allow her to see her baby until she'd heard all the details.

All of them.

Kakashi had been a part of the recon team that found the genin's and Obito. Instead of following protocol, Kakashi teleported him back to Konoha, and, in Tsunade's opinion, ensured his survival. After an eighteen hour surgery he relapsed, and if it wasn't for Kakashi's blood (Sakura didn't miss the look her Shishou gave her as she explained Kakashi hadn't yet left the hospital) he would surely have not made it through the next few crucial nights.

Now Sakura sat with her sleeping son, watching him as he slept, his

heart monitor keeping her own heart beating. She spent a lot of her time healing small bits of scar tissue around his healing wounds. Whispering to him his favorite childhood stories. Her favorite stories from his childhood. And just holding his hand, grateful he was alive. Because she wasn't sure what she'd do without him.

After two days, she left when visiting hours were over she pulled her cloak up high over her head, and made the familiar trek towards the residential district. She walked through back alleys and even took to the roof tops. She stopped outside a familiar apartment.

She knew it was still Kakashi's apartment. He'd lived there long before she became his student and he had no reason to move. She slowly lifted a tentative hand. She took a shaky breath before she lightly knocked.

And waited.

No one answered.

She knocked again, a little harder this time, but there was still no answer. Her heart raced. She hadn't expected him to be out.

She grabbed the handle and turned, her stomach dropping as she met resistance.

He locked his door.

She swiftly left the apartment entrance and followed the wall to an alley. A familiar alley where she found Kakashi's bedroom window. He never locked it. He used it more than the front door. With one fluid jump, she landed on the small sill outside the window. She pressed her fingers to the window and slowly raised it, slinking into the small bedroom.

She wasn't sure if what had stayed the same was eerier than the small things that changed.

He had a new small lamp on his new bedside table. The carpet was a little more worn than before. The comforter was crumpled to one side of the bed. She ran her fingers over the light fabric. It was new-but it was still the old navy blue shurikens. She bit her lip as she walked through the small apartment, making mental notes of things. New plants, new dents in the wall. A new kitchen faucet with old chipped plates. Her heart clenched the longer she was there. She finally made it back.

But he wasn't home.

III

Kakashi climbed through his window as the sun was coming up. He was exhausted. He sat outside Obito's room most of the day until the person inside left when visiting hours were over. He snuck back in after the rotation change and sat with him. He wasn't sure if he'd been awake throughout the day, but Kakashi pulled up a chair and sat next to him, pulling out his book, and reading in the dark. He eventually started reading to the boy out loud.

He was old enough.

As the first morning nurse came to do their rounds, Kakashi was out of the hospital and on his way home. He stopped to update Rin, Obito, and Minato-sensei about young Obito’s (Chibito as Obito would have certainly called him) condition.

When he climbed into his apartment window, he felt something was off. He listened carefully, but didn't hear, nor sense anything. He shrugged it off, stripped himself of his pack and shirt and climbed into bed.

He inhaled deeply, almost falling to sleep instantly.

And for the first time in two years, he dreamt of Sakura.

III

Sakura went to Kakashi's apartment every night, sitting on his bed, waiting.

It was ridiculous, she knew. He had other things. He could be out with friends, with-with a girlfriend, or on a mission-

But the look Tsunade gave her made her think he was here. Every night she'd sit waiting for him until the sun came up. She would then walk towards his old haunts, stopping at the memorial until the sun had fully risen. And he never showed.

She wanted to scream and pull her hair out. But, by then the hospital was open for visitors and she returned to Obito's side as he slowly healed.

III

“You..stay-” Kakashi stopped as the boy spoke. He'd started waking up the past two nights and sitting with Kakashi. They didn't speak, Kakashi doubted Obito had the energy, only listening to the late Konoha night.

“Hmmm?”

The boy tried to sit up, wincing slightly. “You don't-you don't have to leave.” It looked like that small amount of movement, tuckered him out. The boy's green eyes were closed.

Kakashi shook his head, “I don't want to get in the way of you and your family-”

“No!” Kakashi almost jumped at the boy's sudden outburst. “No! Stay!” He leaned back in his bed.

Kakashi nodded, sitting back down in his chair. “I'll stay.”

Obito smiled like a drunk. “Good...” He said in a tired mumble. “Mom will be happy.” Obito drifted off the sleep. Kakashi sat with him for another hour. But, when he felt someone's presence coming down the hall, he tousled the boy's hair, vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

III

Kakashi forced Naruto to give him at least a three day mission after that. When he returned, Obito was gone.

Suna

Chapter Notes

sixteen

Kakashi watched as Shikamaru readjusted his cloak for the third time since they walked through the gate. It seemed to be getting worse as the made their way past the checkpoint and into the throng of villagers.

Shikamaru readjusted his cloak. Then pulled at the collar. Picked at his buttons before throwing the cloak over his shoulder before covering his shoulders again. The man's usual bored facade was now shifty and alert as they walked through throngs of Suna civilians as they made their way to the Kazekage tower. His face shifting from its normal pale to flush and back to pale.

“Are you okay?” Kakashi frowned, coughing subtly. Shikamaru froze in poking at a button before murmuring a soft 'sorry' before dropping his hands to his side.

Kakashi wondered if Shikamaru and Temari-san had gotten into a fight. But then again, Naruto had been acting suspiciously too. The way that he looked at him when he handed him the scroll made Kakashi's hair stand on end. And let's not mention the manic smile. And when he said “Have fun.”

Kakashi bumped into someone, snapping him back into the present. It was an older woman glared at him with a scowl, “What it, Obi-” She blinked before gaping.

“Sorry.” Kakashi said, giving her an eye crinkle and a bow.

The woman looked him over, stopping on his hair, before her face flushed. She shook her head. “Excuse me.” She whispered, moving away quickly.

Kakashi watched her pass, pulling his cloak hood up, then shoving his hands in his pockets. He looked over to see Shikamaru giving him the same pained expression the woman had. Kakashi raised a brow at the Shikamaru, who shook his head and pinched his nose.

“So fucking trou-”

“Shikamaru?”

“Temari-san?” Kakashi barely recognized her as her wavy hair was matted against her face while bits of dirt and sand were sticking to the strands and her face. Her clothes might have been black, or maybe a brown. Or, Kakashi mused, she might have just been wearing sand.

“Temari!” Shikamaru either seemed very pleased, or very alarmed to see her. “Why are you covered in dirt.”

“There was an explosion.” She gave Shikamaru a confused look. “I didn't expect-” She glanced over and then did a double take. Her eyes widened. “Ka-Kakashi-san!” She looked at Shikamaru, who looked like he was stuck in his own shadow capture. Her eyes darted between the two Leaf shinobi. “What are you-”

“The Hokage sent us.” He offered lamely. That wasn’t entirely true. He offered to come.

There was someone he wanted to check up on.

Her brow knitted as her lip twitched. She looked at Shikamaru disapprovingly before looking over her shoulder. “Fine, listen, I-I have to get ready for a mission. It’s a large one. *A lot of us* are leaving for it. We’ll be gone a couple weeks.” She looked around, stopping to look at Kakashi quickly before swallowing thickly. “Do you know how long you're going to be here?”

Kakashi looked to Shikamaru who shrugged, “Depends on what the Hokage and the Kazekage are discussing that had to be hand delivered.”

Probably dinner recipes.

Temari opened her mouth when a small woman who was just as dirty as Temari-san walked up. “Temari-sensei, I smoothed it over with the training ground staff, he-” Her eyes spotted Shikamaru and smiled brightly, she opened her mouth to say something but her eyes caught sight of Kakashi and she too gaped at him.

What the hell?

Temari made a small noise. “Oh! Well!” She clapped her hands together, looking between the two. “I see you're busy!” She glanced over Shikamaru's shoulder. “We'll just go and get ready for the mission we are leaving for *today* -”

Kakashi tuned her out as he glanced over his shoulder. Two equally dirty people were chatting on the other side of the street. One was another short girl/or woman and the other-

“Obito,” Kakashi felt something in his chest relax. *He’s alright* . He was covered head to toe in sand and dirt-the only clean part was the bottom half of his face and around his piercing green eyes. His large gourd was missing, but Kakashi assumed that he didn’t necessarily need it while in the village.

Obito had certainly grown in the year since he'd seen him; He was taller, than he had been before, maybe taller than Kakashi was now. Like when Kakashi was sixteen, he was slight. It meant he was fast, but his extra height probably slowed him down.

His dirty hair flopped forward as he leaned down and spoke to a small woman, the sand and dirt weighing it down. He was leaning heavily on a tall fan, similar to Temari-san’s.

Unlike himself at sixteen, Kakashi noticed he seemed *happy* . His shoulders light as his face lit up like the sun as he pitched back and laughed.

Kakashi smiled brightly.

“Oh! you know Obito, Kakashi-san?” Temari-san's voice was slightly higher than normal.

“Yes, we’ve met a few times,” Kakashi looked over to her. Her face was neutral, but her companion's bright eyes gave them both away. *They already knew this.* “He found me half dead a few years back. And I-”

“Saved his life.” The girl whispered in awe. She shook her head, quickly. “I-I mean I heard about it from S-Tsunade-sama.”

“Hachiko!”

Kakashi tilted his head. “You know Tsunade?”

The girl opened her mouth, looking over at Temari before pressing her lips together. She looked at Obito. “Yes, she has frequented this village...only a few times. Hospital things. I work there sometimes. She...was quite vocal about the surgery shortly after it happened.” She smiled nervously. Kakashi couldn’t tell what part of her story was a lie. “If you hadn't broken protocol, he wouldn't be here.” She turned

back to him. “We have not had the opportunity to thank you.” She bowed deeply. Kakashi looked away, pressing his fingers to the paper in his pocket.

“So...” Kakashi turned to Temari-san. “He's your student?”

“...Yes.” Kakashi watched her as she stood straighter.

Kakashi shrugged. “I was just curious. He seems quite gifted.”

After a few moments, Temari answered. “Yes, he is.” Her voice softened, “But perhaps that is more of my brother's doing.” She looked away. “As well as his mother's.”

Kakashi nodded, making a small humming noise. He looked over to the boy and leaned back on the balls of his feet. “He mentioned his mother,” He hesitated as all three of his companion’s faces changed. He looked back at Obito, “I assumed she would have come to Konoha when he was in the hospital, but I never saw her.” Their expressions didn’t change.

Kakashi started to feel uncomfortable. He looked at Shikamaru. “We have business with the Kazekage?”

Shikamaru nodded. “Yes.” He sighed in relief.

Kakashi turned and moved towards the Kazekage tower, giving them a small wave.

After a beat Shikamaru was on his heels.

III

Obito and Mako were in their ANBU uniform, gripping the side of the roof of Suna's visitor's center. They couldn't see into the Kazekage's tower, but they could see the exit.

“I can't believe that Kakashi is here!” Mako whispered behind her mask. She was bouncing up and down as Obito stared at the door. “Why do you think he's here?”

Obito didn’t answer.

“Obito?”

Why was he here? Should I tell Mom? Part of Obito felt it was his duty to warn his mother. But another part of him wanted them to bump

into each other.

“Ah-Kakashi!” Sakura stared, shocked. She had been carrying bags of groceries. Seeing him made her drop them, crushing the eggs.

“Sa-Sakura.” Kakashi pauses, he reaches out to her, but retracts. Words fumble in his mouth before he finally speaks. “You're-you've been-”

“Yes,” she looks away, blushing, “and you have a son.” She smiles brightly. “He's-”

Kakashi closed the gap. “Yes, Obito-I know. He's very brave. More amazing than myself.”

A loud snap brought him back. “Obito!” He looked over to where Mako had lifted her mask and was glaring at him, her fingers in front of his face. “We don't have a lot of time, we’ve got that mission”

“There he is.” Obito cut her off. Shikamaru and Kakashi were leaving the tower. Kakashi pulled his cloak hood over his head and looked around before they started down the street.

“Obito, we don't have a lot of-”

“Let's go.”

III

Kakashi had a feeling that they were being followed. He had a feeling it was Obito.

He wasn't really sure why he thought it was him. Maybe because he hoped it was. *It was just something about him...*

Kakashi smiled to himself as he had a little revelation.

I see myself in him.

Or at least the boy I wanted to be at that age. Obito would be very proud they shared a name.

Kakashi chucked at himself as he and Shikamaru turned down an alley, heading towards the commerce area. *The only big difference is that Obito seems happy.*

I’m glad.

“Hopefully it’s only a few more days and we can leave.” Shikamaru grumbled, looking around. “This way. I know a good place to eat.”

Kakashi followed, his hands in his pockets and he skimmed the area. “Ah!” He hummed. “But I thought you'd want to stay. Spend some time with Temari-chan.”

Shikamaru sighed. “No.” Despite himself, his face turned red. “Plus her team is leaving on an escort mission. It must be pretty serious, she wouldn’t tell me much more than that.”

Kakashi shrugged. “I’m sure we could ask to go with them.”

“What?!” Shikamaru spun around, “What? No! Absolutely not,”

“Suna and Konoha have a strong alliance.” Kakashi said, his eyes roaming the crowd. “And It's not like no one knows about you and Temari-san.” *Plus if we went there, I could speak to Obito. Give him so pointers of being a young prodigy.* Though it might be a bit too late for that. He seemed to be doing fine on his own. *But still* , “I’m sure Naruto could spare us for a few days.” Shikamaru started sputtering. Kakashi turned his head to laugh when something caught his eye.

Something *pink* .

Kakashi felt the world slow. His heart thudded heavily in his chest as the world around him became blurred. Then just as suddenly, it sped up, his heart dropping and stomach rising, knocking the wind out of him.

He stopped in his tracks.

Pink hair. A shade he hadn’t seen in sixteen years.

No . Kakashi swallowed thickly. *Impossible* .

He ripped up his headband and let the Sharingan swirl. After a few seconds, his heart stopped.

“Sakura.”

III

Obito watched from his rooftop perch as Kakashi stopped in the street, making the people behind him almost bump into him. He saw him raise his headband.

“The Sharingan.” Mako whispered. Obito barely heard her. Kakashi stiffened. Obito's eyes followed Kakashi's gaze, but Mako was quicker. “Oh fuck, of fuck, of fuck!” Mako was smacking Obito's arm. “What is your mom doing here?! She should be getting ready for the mission!”

Mom.

Obito’s head snapped back to Kakashi. He couldn’t breathe.

This is it. Obito watched Kakashi frozen to the spot, staring at his mom window shop up the road. Obito tried calming his breathing. *Kakashi has seen Mom. He knows we’re here.* He watched in amazement as Kakashi slowly slipped his headband back into place and took to the rooftops, Shikamaru close on his heels.

Obito looked at Mako, who's eyes were wide. “What do we do?”

He looked back at Kakashi, who was now meters away from his mom. “Come on.”

They stayed parallel to Kakashi on the other side of the street as they trailed Mom down the road. Even from this distance, Obito could tell that Kakashi was watching her closely.

Her hair was up in her messy work bun. She was half dressed for the mission with her traveling tan pants and heavy boots with a small pack on her hip. It looked like she had just forgotten something while getting ready but-

“Who's she with?”

“Tanade-sensei.” Obito clenched his fist as he watched his mother smiling with Tanade-sensei as they walked down the busy street together. “He’s head of something at the hospital. She's been teaching him about poisons.” But they aren't at work. *Why is he here?*

Kakashi watched his mother curiously, ignoring the man at her side. Shikamaru looked agitated. He looked down at his mother, who had stopped outside a store. Tanade-sensei stopped too and leaned in close, saying something in her ear. Obito looked up to see Kakashi had gotten slightly closer, but stayed hidden behind a shop banner.

Kakashi’s face gave nothing away. Obito looked back down and watched as his mother’s smile faltered. Tanade-sensei touched her arm. Obito grabbed a kunai. His eyes flickered to Kakashi, who was just watching curiously. He looked back down at his mother. She was

shaking her head and smiling sadly. Tanade-sensei took a step back. His mother shook her head.

He gave her a friendly wave and was off. As soon as he turned away, she sighed heavily. She turned to go into the store and paused. Turning back around she looked up and blinked. She looked at him and gave him a wide smile and waved.

III

Kakashi watched as Sakura waved at someone across the street. Kakashi couldn't see who she was waving at but watched her walk into the store.

He and Shikamaru stood in silence.

A few minutes later, Sakura walked out of the store and took a left down a street. He didn't follow her. He just watched her disappear.

“You're not going to follow her?”

Kakashi turned to Shikamaru. Anger flooded him. “You knew.” It wasn't a question.

Shikamaru swallowed thickly, standing straight. “I knew.” His weight shifted, as if reading himself to flee.

Kakashi couldn't control himself. He punched Shikamaru. His satisfaction of watching the other man fly across the roof dimmed as quickly as it came. People around them gasped and parted as he stalked back up to Shikamaru. “I have been looking for her for *sixteen years* .” Kakashi said lowly.

“And I couldn't tell you. You know I couldn't.” Shikamaru sat up, holding his bloody nose. “She doesn't even know that I know.” He looked away, pulling a cloth out of his pack. “Well...have known.”

“Who else?”

“Kakashi, you know-”

“Who. Else?”

Shikamaru sighed, wheezing slightly. He studied Kakashi and sighed. “Everyone.”

Kakashi pressed his lips together. Slowly, the looks the smiles, fucking

Naruto made sense. “How?” He growled. “I've been here! I've looked here!” Kakashi marched to him and ripped him off the ground.

“I really don't know!” Shikamaru took a wheezing breath. “I have stayed the hell away from her. All I know is she's been training medics and working on poisons at the hospital. You want to ask someone, then fucking ask Tsunade! Or Ino. I-”

Kakashi felt something sharp on his neck. His looked down at the tanto blade against his neck. He could feel the blunt end pressing against his throat. His eyes followed the blade as he dropped Shikamaru. Shikamaru landed in a crouch, coughing.

A masked ANBU agent gripped the sword tightly. “You can’t do this here, Hatake-san.” Obito’s voice brought him back to the present. Where they were. Who he was. “Though he is not Sunan, you can’t fight on the streets like this.”

He looked out at the eyes of the Sunan citizens watching in terror.

Kakashi looked back at Shikamaru, who was breathing heavily through his mouth. And then back to Obito’s masked face. He wanted to knock the sword out of his hand, to fight. To scream.

To explain the pain in his chest. The pain that had been there longer than this boy had been alive.

“Hatake-san,” But the sword trembled against his skin.

Kakashi deflated, turning on his heel.

“You going after her?” Shikamaru demanded.

Kakashi didn't respond. He closed his eyes, his Sharingan stinging with the image of her. He frowned as he made quick hand signs, disappearing in a puff of smoke.

III

Sakura was almost finished packing when she heard the door slammed open, rattling the walls. Heavy footsteps echoed in the hall. Sakura looked up to see an ANBU with silver hair sticking out from behind his mask.

“You're lucky the photos have been taken off the walls or you'd-”

“Why were you with him?” Obito's voice was calm with a mixture of

emotions Sakura couldn't place.

“Who?”

“Why were you with Tanade!” Obito's words slipped and venom dropped off every syllable.

Sakura put her hands on her hips. “Haruno Obito, what has gotten-”

He was inches from her, he had his mask up, but she could see his green eyes through the slits in the mask. They were narrowed and rimmed with red. “Why?” He asked slowly.

She raised a brow. “He was just walking with me.”

“What did he say to you?”

“Why do you-”

“What. Did. He. Say.”

She almost didn't answer him. She slowly plucked his mask off his face. “He...asked me if I wanted to have coffee.” She said incredulously. “He-he asked me on a date and I said no.” She poked the ANBU in the chest plate, making it reverberate. “Why were you following me in your little get up? I thought you were training this morning.” His brows were still furrowed as he took a step back, breathing heavily. “Obito, what is going on?”

He took a step back. “You told him no?”

“Yes. I didn't want to.”

“Why?”

“Obi-”

“Why?”

She watched him for a moment before laughing. “Because I don't like him like that?” She threw her hands in the air. “What is it to you?” She enunciated every word. “Why does this-”

“You-do you still have feelings for-for Kakashi?”

Sakura raised a brow. She never heard Obito talk about her and Kakashi's relationship. When he was younger, he always asked for

stories about his father's heroism. He wanted to know everything about him. Not them. And he'd never said his name. She didn't know how she felt about that. “Obito,”

He turned quickly, giving a half wave. “I need to get ready.”

She watched him leave.

His door closed silently.

“What-?”

There was a knock on the front door and she heard it close. Sakura sighed as she heard small footsteps pad silently through the hall. She watched as Mako, in regular Jounin attire appeared in the hall. The young girl blinked at Sakura before moving quietly into Obito's room, the door clicking softly behind her.

She looked down at her pack and then back up.

What is going on?

III

When Obito and Mako emerged from his bedroom, he seemed more aloof, like his regular self. He sealed his door, readjusting his bag beneath his gourd and met Sakura in the front hall. He smiled at her cheerfully before pulling his mask up, wrapping an arm around her and walked with her out the door. Mako closed it behind her.

“Obito I'm-”

“Let's head out.” He said quietly. He was trying to sound cheerful, but she could hear the strain in his voice.

“Obito,” She grabbed the arm around her and pulled away. His short silver hair stuck out in little tuffs to the right and with his mask up- “Obito, to answer your question, yes, I still care very deeply for your father.”

His eyes narrowed, a brow raising slightly. “But?”

She shrugged, patting his masked cheeks. “But what? There are no buts.” She put her arm around his waist. “I don't know what brought all this on, but you need to understand that he's the second most important man in my life.” She held tight as Obito tried to pull away. Mako was sniggering behind them. “And he always will be. There is

no more room in my heart for anyone else."

She felt Obito relax. He wrapped his arms around his mother. "And why haven't you-"

It was her turn to be tense. "Come on, we've got people to save." Obito squeezed her shoulder.

"It's never too late, Mom." He whispered in her ear.

III

Dusk had settled in Suna when Kakashi opened the door to a house he'd never seen before in his sixteen years of coming to Suna. He looked around the hallway, taking in every square inch. He took carefully moved down the hall, his feet silent on the tile. He passed a small kitchen. It was a simple setup with two chairs around a small table. The dishes in the dish rack were still damp.

Someone had been here recently. Kakashi's mind showed him a woman with long pink hair standing at the sink, humming off key.

He shook his head.

With more caution, he moved farther into the house, eyes moving over the darkening living room. *She still hasn't replaced that coffee table.* A large shogi board sat in the corner, a game half played.

He slowly passed a bathroom, he noticed with a sickening feeling in his gut the two toothbrushes at the sink before staring at a door at the end of the hall. It had a large seal on it. It screamed 'I dare you.' He almost dispelled it when he caught a scent he hadn't smelled in sixteen years.

He blinked back tears as he made his way into a bedroom. The scent enveloped him as he moved into the room.

Sakura lives here. This is Sakura's home. He swallowed thickly. He reached out and touched the bed. *Here.*

Kakashi struggled to exhale.

She lives right here, but she's not here. I was too late.

Again.

But she was safe. And she isn't here alone.

Of course she isn't alone . It'd been sixteen years. She'd have long since moved on. And he thought he'd be fine with that. Be happy as long as she was safe.

But he wasn't fine.

His mind thought back to Obito. Not *his* Obito, but Sunan Obito. How happy he was talking to his friend.

Jealously filled him. *I had only really been happy once.*

He shook his head, turning to leave. But froze.

It was *them* . A picture. A picture of them. On the nightstand.

How did she get this? Sasuke destroyed-

He touched the frame lightly. His heart shrank. Why hasn't she-

"What would you have done?" Kakashi didn't look up as Shikamaru spoke. "If I would have told you? If someone would have told you?" Shikamaru shrugged, "Were you going to run here?" he gestured around, "Done-"

"She must have been so alone."

Shikamaru snorted. "She's fine." Shikamaru wouldn't look at him. "The people here love her. They protect her."

"Someone else lives here." Shikamaru face revealed nothing. "I saw two toothbrushes in the bathroom." His mind went to the man he saw her with. "What's behind the door-"

"I don't know, man." Shikamaru scratched the back of his head. "This is my first time in this house."

He's lying. Kakashi was going to call him out when they heard the crunching sound of sand.

Shikamaru's eyes widened, but Kakashi had him by the wrist and out of the house in a poof of smoke.

If Kakashi was honest with himself, he wasn't quite ready for the answer.

III

Obito looked cautiously into the kitchen, kunai in hand. Someone is here. “This is my first time in this house.”

Shikamaru? He took a quick intake of breath.

Kakashi !

He moved towards the back of the house, turning to face his mother's room in time to see a poof of smoke.

“Fuck.” He whispered.

“Obito! Hurry up! Grab the bag your mom forgot so we can go. We need to get to that village by tomorrow!” Mako yelled from the hall. She must have not felt it.

Obito walked into his mother's room and scooped up the left behind bag and walked back out, looking back once before following Mako out of the house.

What the Good Book has Taught Us

Obito sighed as he looked over the top of Icha Icha to his teammate and sensei from behind his large sunglasses. The brisk gust of wind whirled sand around him, but he kept it at bay without thinking.

Hachiko had her hood pulled tightly over her face, pouting in his directions. He was sure if he could see her eyes behind her bright goggles, he'd see a death glare. He moved his tiny barrier to include her. She relaxed, pulling down her hood.

Obito looked out at the horizon, “shouldn’t they be here by now?” His eyes fell back to his book. It's not that he was really reading it. He'd read this little, tattered orange book ten times over. He brought it with him everywhere. If he really tried, he was sure he could recite it by heart. He just liked the look of him, slouching slightly as he looked indifferent holding it. He thought it made him look cool.

“Patience, Haruno.” Temari-sensei said, leaning against her fan. Her cloak wasn’t wrapped around her nearly as much as his teammate; the hood was down and yet she didn’t seem to be affected by the onslaught of sand. “It’s a three day trek from Leaf to here. They will be exhausted.”

Obito rolled his eyes. “They have another three days across the desert to Stone. They better not be *that* tired-”

Temari-sensei opened her mouth but Hachiko held out a hand. “There they are!” Hachiko exclaimed.

Obito watched as five figures appeared on the horizon, hazy against the sandy backdrop. Their white cloaks sticking out in the beige sand. He looked down at his own beige cloak. He wouldn't be the first killed if anything came up on this little journey.

Obito slid his book into his back pouch, and put his hands in his pocket as his sensei walked towards the Leaf ninja, followed by Hachiko. He fell into step behind her.

This was an unusual mission. Usually they didn’t do escort missions, especially for shinobi , but with the high traffic of S-class missing nin picking up on the outskirts of Wind and Stone, Gaara-jii-san assured Naruto that they would lend a hand. He sighed, cursing Mako. *She* got a solo S-Ranked ANBU mission.

Lucky.

“Come on, Babito.” Temari-sensei called. He sighed, not picking up his pace. He'd been in ANBU too long. These missions *sucked.*

They were so boring.

The Leaf ninja all huddled together, their hoods covered their heads tightly. One looked in his direction and waved frantically, taking a few quick steps towards him before yanking their hood down. “Hey there,” Ino’s eyes widened as he moved past Hachiko. “You’ve gotten tall.”

He held up a hand in a small wave, “Yo, Ino, are you going on this mission?”

She shook her head, also seeming unperturbed by the sand. “Going to a spa in Rain. Thought I’d tag along until Suna.” Her voice seemed almost dreamy.

He nodded, “Sounds nice. You should stop in Suna before you go.” He said casually. He did his best to make it not sound so rehearsed. His mother had been talking about this trip for months. The last few days she'd been dancing around the house, collecting all the small things she was going to need on the trip, nagging him over needless information about not burning the house down.

Any retort from him was stopped when she pointed to their cactus.

She grinned, “I might do that.” He shrugged, his hand going back to his pocket. “That way.” He jerked his head towards the direction of the village.

Temari-eyes rolled her eyes. “I’m escorting her to the village before we go to Rain.”

“ *We* ? You’re going Sensei? I thought we had a mission?”

“You’re in charge.” Her eyes hardened. “Don’t let anyone die this time, ok?”

The four Leaf shinobi gasped. Obito rolled his eyes. “It only happened that one time.”

“Twice.” Hachiko said.

Obito grinned from underneath his mask. “Was it really twice, I

thought they were just heavily maimed..."

"Twice." Hachiko affirmed.

"Ah, well then yes, twice, thank you."

Hachiko laughed, and Temari-sensei didn't look please.

"Obito, I'm serious,"

"I'll do my best, Sensei." He watched the two women walk in the direction of the village before turning back to the four silent, shaking, shinobi. "We were kidding." He said in the thick silence. "We joke in the desert." When they didn't speak he just sighed, pulling up his hood and turning towards his teammate. Hachiko grinned under her cloak. Obito shrugged, leading the way.

III

They didn't come across any problems as they made their way north. The leaf shinobi were relatively quiet. Possibly still scared. Obito could deduce there were three men, all of whom drooled over Hachiko once she pulled down her hood. The fourth, female, seemingly ignored everyone.

Obito appreciated the seriousness she was taking on this mission. Someone had to take it seriously.

He wasn't.

As the landscape changed from sand to trees, Obito sighed, pulling down the hood to his own cloak and pulling his mask down. He ran a chakra filled hand through his tall silver and pink locks, pulling the sand out of it. As he pulled his fingers through the ends of his hair, he flung the small bits of sand that had collected in his hair away with the flick of his wrist.

"Nifty little trick you got there." Obito froze. Spinning around, heart threatening to rip out of his chest, his fingers twitched slightly. *No way...*

"Mina?!" He cursed as his voice cracked slightly. It had to be her. Her voice was a bit deeper, smoother than the last time he heard her high squeaky voice from childhood.

Behind the heavy hood, he could see bright blue eyes shining. "I was

wondering how long it would take you to figure it out." He saw her lips curl into a mischievous smile. "For someone considered the genius of Suna you're pretty unobservant." She slowly gave him a once over, making every hair stand on end. "You've gotten a little taller..."

He felt heat rise to his face. "A bit." He fiddled with the mask around his neck. He towered over most people now. Mina came up to his shoulder. He looked up at the sun, wondering why it seemed to be more hot all the sudden. "You've become," he shrugged, "more cloaked..."

She smiled, going back to looking straight ahead, moving past him, moving quickly to catch up with the others who had moved ahead. "So," her voice was like velvet, "what is the infamous 'Sand Man,' going to do for us today?"

"Sand Man?"

She saw her raise a brow. "You don't know?" Her voice held a bit of mockery to it, but instead of making him angry, it made his fingers and toes tingle. It could be the 'I-know-something-you-don't-know' smile that hadn't left her lips.

He scoffed. "No one-"

"Everyone calls you that."

"No one calls me that."

"In Konoha, you're a legend."

"Sounds like you need better legends-"

"Why are you escorting my team out here?"

"I'm here as extra muscles and my teammates here to patch up the inevitably maimed." He looked down at her. "You?"

She pulled a scroll out of her cloak. She shrugged, "Nothing special. Pretty hush-hush though."

Obito took a step forward. "Mi-

A sudden surge of chakra came from their left and Obito summoned his sand, creating a barricade around their party. The dull sounds of kunai hitting the sand put the rest of their team on alert. A hand came out of the ground, wrapping around Mina's ankle and dragging her

into the sandy dirt.

“Shit!” Obito closed his eyes, focusing on searching for her chakra. Her teammates screamed in alert, dashing into the trees in all directions.

Hachiko stood at his side, waiting patiently. “North by Northwest.” He whispered.

She nodded. “I’ll follow the three. I’m sure they'll almost get themselves killed.”

“I've got Mina.” He turned towards the direction of the girl’s chakra.

“Mina?” He stopped as Hachiko laughed. “That's seriously, Mina?”

“Yeah?”

She rolled her eyes. “No wonder you were picked for this.” Before he could say anything, she was gone.

He stood still for a minute, picking up on the sand that was left on Mina. He caught hold of it and ran. As he closed the distance, he heard screaming. Fear trickled down his spine as he picked up his pace.

A loud explosion echoed in the small wooded area. He came across what seemed to be a newly made clearing, watching in slow motion as Mina’s cloak billowed past her, revealing her long red hair and regulation chuunin uniform as she lunged forward, a large whirling ball of chakra pressing into the chest of a battered looking man.

“Ra-sen-gan!” She screamed. The man went flying into a tree, sliding to the ground.

Mina huffed, crossing her arms under her chest. “You need to learn how to treat a god damn lady!”

He swallowed thickly. He barely heard her.

Icy blue eyes scanning the clearing until they landed on him. The anger quickly softened, and she smiled coyly.

“Muscle?” His heart lurched in his chest as butterflies erupted in his stomach. “Good job on that.”

Suddenly a man dropped from the sky, about to land behind the

kunoichi. She raised an elbow but Obito threw a kunai, landing on his shoulder. A wave of sand crashed into the man, causing him to topple over. He was pinned.

Mina, elbow still raised, looked at him. A small smile twitching on her lips.

“Are you still a chuunin?” he asked, moving towards her.

She inspected her nails. “Not really.” She motioned at him. “You still a jounin?”

He smiled wide. “Not really.” Sand swirled above him before slowly easing back into his gourd.

“Show off.”

He nodded, moving to take another step but heard Hachiko approaching with the rest.

“Only three broken ribs and a collar bone. I think it was a success.”

Obito looked at Mina. “You still have the scroll?” Mina grinned.

“Never had it. Inuzuka’s got it.” He looked back to one of the guys, who pulled out a much larger scroll from his cloak.

“And yours?”

Mina’s grin was fox-like, “A large explosive tag.”

He swallowed, nodding.

Obito was in love.

III

“This is your house?” Mina said, slightly unimpressed.

Her mission had been successful and they were just waiting for Ino to return from Rain. They had left her team and Hachiko behind at the gate and he showed her around the village.

She wanted to see his box of letters.

He shrugged. “We all can't grow up in the Hokage tower.” He looked behind him, seeing her eye the exploded cactus. She looked at him

with a raised brow.

He stood straight and looked at the cactus. Despite being half way blown to bits, it was still somehow growing. “It was unsightly.”

“It *was* ?” She laughed.

He nodded, turning back to the door. “Come on, there's a storm brewing.”

“I didn't think it rained here.”

“It does rain, just not often.” He threw open the door. “Not that kind of storm.”

He placed his gourd down and summoned all the sand on them into the gourd. He watched her look back to him, blue eyes watching the sand find its home amongst the rest. She smiled softly. “That feels weird.”

He shrugged, “You get used to it.” He watched her walk down the hallway towards the kitchen.

“Your house is pretty bare.”

“When I was ten my mother painted the walls. And she still hasn't put the pictures back.” He stopped. “Needs to be painted again.”

He showed her into the living room, moving back towards the kitchen. He started making tea.

He was making tea for *Mina* . In his house. It felt like a dream.

The tea kettle screamed. He grabbed tea and hot cups of water before moving back into the living room. “We can use the shogi board as a table.” He gestured towards the wooden board with pieces scattered around it. “That's what we usually do.”

He paused in the doorway, watching as she inspected the few pictures on the book self in the corner. He saw her eyes stopping on the old, faded picture of his mother’s old team.

“So it’s true.” She whispered, looking over to him. “Your mother was my father’s teammate?”

He tilted his head, “You didn’t know?”

She shrugged, “We don’t talk about her.” The way she said ‘her’ was hesitant, and timid. “She's a sore subject.

“He blames himself, I think. For how things turned out.”

He shrugged, “You want something to drink? Some tea?”

She nodded, turning back to the pictures of her father and his mother. “Though…I thought Sasuke-san was on their team too.”

He snorted, kneeling down at the shogi board. “Yeah, there are no pictures of him in this house.” He dropped the teabags into the steaming cups. “To my mother, her team was Naruto, Sai, Yamato, and Kakashi.”

She nodded. “My mother used to tell me stories about their adventures together as a team.” Spinning on her heel, moving to sit across from him. “My mother is the only one that will speak of her “ She smiled. “About how she was unbelievably smart. And beautiful. How she walked up to Tsunade-sama and demanded to be trained. How she was an amazing medic. And a wonderful person.”

He pressed the cup to his lips with shaky hands. She was watching him strangely.

“So, how is your first time in Suna?” He asked, swallowing thickly.

“Said you have all my letters, still?”

Obito thought for a moment before answering. He felt like squirming under her gaze but he tried not to show it. “Yes, they are in my room.” He said finally. He sat up. “Did you want anything with your tea? Like sugar or milk or-”

She shook her head, downing the cup.

“Show me. The letters, I mean.”

He watched her for a moment before nodding, standing quickly, knocking his knees into the shogi board.

He motioned for her to follow him. “This way.” She quickly stood and followed behind him.

She paused outside his door. He looked up to the giant seal on his door and laughed. “It's not real.”

“It looks real.”

He turned to look at her. “That's the-” She had unzipped her flak jacket, shrugging it off her shoulders. He suddenly found it hard to breathe “-point.” He stared at her for a moment before turning, wetting his mouth and opening the door.

He'd read too much Icha Icha for this.

They entered his room and he instantly disliked everything about it. From the shuriken sheets to the various shinobi gear scattered across the room. It was too neat. It was too messy.

Too childish.

He turned when the door closed with a small click.

“So!” She grinned, “those letters!” She crossed her arms, suddenly looking nervous. She quickly turned to his dresser, eyeing the picture of his own team next to his grandfather's mask. She smiled. “You look so tiny.”

“I was.” He said coming to stand next to her. His stomach was jittery and nervous and he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. Or anything else. She lightly touched his grandfather's mask. He watched her fingers trace the fading paint. “Mina.” He said softly after a few minutes. “Mina, why are we in here?”

She suddenly turned, pressing her back against his dresser. “You've gotten much bigger.” He shivered as her eyes moved over him. “Much...much taller, you know. Since the last time...” She pressed her lips together. She tapped his chest plate. “We’ve sent so many letters...” She looked down at her hand before her blue eyes looked back at him. “I'd wondered what exactly you'd look like after not seeing you for so long...but I didn't think-” She took a deep breath, her hand lying flat on his chest plate. “I didn't think you'd have grown *this* much.” Her eyes roamed his face, pausing on the bottom half of his face.

He felt hot, his hair standing on end as he struggled to breath. There was this weird pull in his chest towards her.

His fingers touched her arm. She made a small noise, her mouth parting. It did something weird to his insides.

He wanted to hear her do it again.

He leaned down and kissed her.

He felt his insides explode as he pulled back, gasping for air. Fireworks went off as she closed the distance again, her arms coming around his neck and their mouths pressing against each other. He lost his balance and they stumbled back, landing on the bed with a bounce.

She smiled as they fell. She looked over and the smile fell. She leaned in and gently placed her lips on his. He pulled himself closer to her as their lips pressed against each other.

She sighed. “I've been wanting to do that since the chuunin exams.” His eyes widened as she kissed him again. She bit his bottom lip, making him open his mouth and diving in. He wasn't sure what he was doing, but he improvised, wrapping his arms around her like the main guy in Icha Icha tended to do. She seemed to like it.

III

There was a loud bang on the front door. Obito jumped to his feet, his brain swirling.

Where?! What?! He looked down to see red hair in his bed. His mouth dried as his body warmed.

He vaguely heard the door open. “Coming in, lover boy!” Obito jumped as Mina stretched like a cat. His brain shorted as he watched his sheets fall away.

Then he heard footsteps down the hall.

Shit . “It’s Mako-” he hissed.

“Where is my shirt!?” He heard Mina whisper as he made a mad dash to the door, slamming it shut before it was blown open.

Mako jammed her foot in the door and he blocked the opening with his body.

“Hey!” Mako sang.”What's going on here?” She smiled devilishly. “I’m not going to look down, because who knows if you’re wearing pants.”

Obito internally screamed. “What do you *want* ?” He snapped, shifting.

Her smile spread even wider, threatening to split her face. “I hope

there is nothing *inappropriate* going on in there. Maybe with the Hokage's daughter. Hachiko said she saw you two-"

" *What do you want* ?!"

"We have a mission." Mako said seriously, "Uzumaki Mina has been M.I.A for hours. There was an attempted kidnapping attempt as her team crossed the desert but after they returned back to Suna, she never checked in with her team at the designated time." She whispered, practically laughing. "And since it happened in Wind, it's our priority. S-Ranked, all of ANBU are out looking for her." Her wide smile darkened. "I've come to collect."

"It has not been-" He looked over Mako's head towards the window. "It's already dark!"

There was an *eep* behind him.

Mako stood straight, "I hope you all aren't doing anything I wouldn't do."

"I don't know what you would do, Mako." He said darkly, turning back to her. "Give us five minutes."

Mako shook her head. "You have thirty seconds. She's got to leave *now* . They might have already sent word to the Hokage."

" *What* !?"

"She was last seen, like, *twelve* hours ago." She held up her fingers. "One-two. Twelve." She took a step back. "Get your shit together." She waved. She sounded angry, but the smile on her face said otherwise. "Who knows how fast the nine-tails can get him here. And let me tell you, I think you'd rather *me* find you in this situation than him-"

He slammed the door. Turned to see Mina was already dressed, her clothes rumpled, but on. Her flush was as red as her hair. "I have to go, apparently." She struggled with her Chuunin vest.

He nodded awkwardly, looking anywhere else but at her. "Yeah..."

They stood there awkwardly.

There was a knock on the door. "Chop, chop! Give her a big ol' smooch goodbye before the other ANBU really think about it and

show up to see you not wearing any pants."

"Dam-" Mina pressed her lips to his and he returned it passionately.

"Did I mention this is a big deal because Ino and your mom are back?" Mako cackled. "Imagine your mom coming home to you looking like that! She's going to wonder where all those bruises on your neck came from!"

Obito pushed Mina away. "You have to go- *now.* " As he bent down and grabbed his pants.

"Will you be coming to Konoha soon?" She asked quickly.

He nodded, pulling her close, kissing her quickly. "As long as you don't tell your father.

"I'll figure something out." She nodded, kissing him softly.

He thought his feet left the ground.

And then she was gone and wrenching the door open. He barely had his pants over his hips as Mako grabbed her and did some quick hand seals and they disappeared in a mist of sand.

And Obito was alone in his room. He couldn't help the grin that spread over his face as his hands remembered just how soft Mina's skin was.

And her-

"Why is the door open?" Obito jumped at his mother's voice. He buttoned his pants and willed the sand from Mako and Mina's departure into his hand.

He smiled brightly, running his other hand through his hair. "Welcome home!"

He slowly backed his way into his room, closing the door quietly, locking the door as he turned to face his room, the feeling of her lips still tingling his.

Sasuke Vs. Obito

“Where in the hell is your gourd?” Mako landed next to him, crouching in the trees.

He nodded towards the clearing, “Over there.” He said vaguely. “They’ll be coming from the west, so this is a perfect place to stop them from getting into Wind. I need you to flank east.”

“You sure?” She sounded skeptical behind her ANBU mask.

“Yes, now are you ready? They’ll be here-”

“But are you-?”

He heard something. He held his left hand up, silencing her, pulling out a small kunai, he looked over to his teammate and nodded. “Why the hell do you always have to be right?” She grumbled before jumping east into the trees.

Their target was a band of four grass ninja that had stolen a scroll in transit to Konoha. Their job was to infiltrate and take back to Suna to be rewritten and sent out.

Obito called forth a bit of sand from a small gourd he kept on his hip during ANBU missions and made small foot holes in the hair. He slowly stood and walked out to the middle of the clearing-twenty feet above the ground. He made sure he didn't make any shadows as the grass shinobi approached. They stopped in the clearing, one catching sight of his gourd. He watched as it got all three of their attention before he slipped from the sky to the ground noiselessly. Obito charged his fist with chakra, walking up to one, spinning him around and smashing his fist into his face. The other two scattered. One jumped right to where Mako was waiting with a sleeper hold. The other two looked at each other before they jumped to the trees.

“They're getting away.”

“No they're not.” Obito said, looking around. “They won't leave without their friends. They'll either kill us or them.” He looked at her. “Be alert.” Obito walked to where his gourd sat, sand already pooling out. He lifted and swung it over his shoulder with ease. One of the grass ninja took the distraction to attack, jumping out of the trees near him.

Mako sighed dramatically before screaming, “Obito, help!” she called distressed. It did the trick. The other man slinked out of his hiding spot. A large wall of sand surrounded Mako and she ran up the side, turning in the air over the man, pulling her leg high. He noticed Mako at the last minute and blocked, somersaulting away but, another wall of sand appeared behind him, trapping him as Mako recovered quickly and running at him with a fist held high. “Sha!” She bellowed as a crack echoed around the sand.

A wave of sand knocked him to the ground as Obito grabbed the other man and gripped his arm and smashed it with chakra embedded strength. Mako did a spin heel kick into the other man, who was scooped up by sand and trapped.

Mako stood straight wiping her brow. “That worked well.”

He raised a brow. “Sha?” He grinned as he stepped over the man withering in pain at his feet. “You did not just scream 'Sha!'?”

Mako rolled her eyes. “Sound effects help!”

He rolled his eyes, going to the man trapped. The sand opened up around his chest. Obito reached in and felt around, searching for the scroll.

“Why do you think he has it?”

Obito pulled out a long narrow scroll. He pulled down his mask and grinned. “Because I'm a genius.”

“All hail the great mind of Haruno Obito.” She deadpanned, “hor without him, I wouldn’t get the chance to dig sand out of my underwear every day. Even when we're in the middle of the Fire Country.”

Obito rolled his eyes, but his smirk widened. “It’s not like I can help my amazing talent for battle strategy.”

“It's those sand waves you do.”

“Hmm...That's what I'll call them.” He said, stepping back from the man. He let his sand tighten around him, making him let out a strangled gasp before he slumped. Obito recalled his sand. “And I'll yell 'Sand Wave!'” He shot his hands in the air.

Mako shook her head, grinning. “All hail the Sand Man.” She looked

at the men scattered in the clearing. “What do we do with these guys?”

Obito looked around, “Leave 'em. We got what we needed.”

They started heading west. Mako jumped, smacking Obito lightly in the chest. “And what happened to the little boy who swore up and down he wasn’t any type of genius.” She said as she started stretching her arms across her body.

He shrugged. She frowned, pulling a kunai out of nowhere she chucked it at him. He caught the loop, spinning it lazily. “I was surrounded by women with giant egos.”

“I think someone's in a good mood because we were close to a certain red-”

Obito stopped, holding a hand up. Something was coming. Very fast. “Down!” He hissed as three kunai shot out of the trees. He threw up a sand wall, making it condense and surrounded them as they crouched.

“I thought there were only four.”

“There was.” He said calmly. He opened a small hole and peered out. There was no movement.

“Two O'clock.” Mako whispered. Sand rushed like a wave towards a cluster of trees. A small rustle to the left and he split the sand and it hit.

A blur of a person kicked and slashed at his sand, moving towards them.

“Break.” He whispered and he let the dome around them fall and they scattered. Mako took to the trees and he took to the air. He focused sand to still at his feet, fifteen feet above the enemy. He didn't move and Obito let sand swarm around him ominously.

Mako didn't wait for the enemy to attack first.

Leaping out of the trees she charged, dropping into a slide that sent the man jumping in the air, kunai raised high above his head. Obito covered Mako with sand, blocking two Kunai as the enemy dropped to the ground, hands making a quick jutsu. Obito watched as his teammate was hit with a giant fireball.

A kunai flew his way, but sand shot up and caught it out of the air. The man was staring at him with dark onyx eyes. Then the eyes were gone, covered in a sand tomb.

Obito fell to the ground as Mako punched her way out of glass.

“Who is it?”

“I don't know.” Obito said as he dropped his gourd. Sand spilled out, covering every inch of him. He looked to Mako who picked up the two kunai.

Obito cracked his neck. “Why is he attacking us?” Mako asked hesitantly. The sand tomb around the man was cracking slightly. “Are you sure it wasn't one of bad guys?”

“ *Yes* .” Obito said through gritted teeth he pulled more sand out of the gourd, covering the clearing with a thin sheet.

“Watch your ass.” Obito only nodded as a fireball shot out of the tomb.

Glass shattered in every direction. Obito and Mako scattered. Obito twirled the kunai in his hands as he skimmed the area. He threw the kunai and slammed his hand into the ground, sending sand, glass, and debris everywhere.

He formed a wall behind the attacker. The man wore dark baggy pants and a white shirt. His hair was black, sticking up in the back, matching his narrowed eyes. He didn't pay attention to the wall as he came up to Obito, sword unsheathed.

Where the hell -

Obito held up his arms, feeling the *thunk* inside his sand armor of the sword. The man's eyes widened, giving Obito the opportunity to grasp the blade, and with charka embedded strength, snap the sword like it was made of wood.

He dropped the sword and had his two hands together. The attacker jumped backwards. Obito saw a white and red symbol on his back before he landed, his eyes no longer a deep coal, but red and black. Obito braced himself as he watched Mako come from behind. The attacker twisted, sending the fire ball her way, which she barely dodged, the smell of tinged skin burning Obito's nostrils as he did a sweep kick at the man's legs.

Jumping out of the way, the man sent another fire ball towards Obito. He pulled out a kunai, stopping Mako's attack. Obito felt the burn through his sand armor, ignoring the feel of the liquid sand melting on his skin. He tightened his fist and advanced. Large walls formed around the trio and Obito ran across them, his hands moving in quick succession.

Obito disappeared.

Mako took advantage. While their opponent was disoriented she struck hard with a knife strike in the neck, causing him to drop. Obito waited until he was on the ground to grab his foot and wrist from underground.

But he wasn't down for long. He ripped himself off the ground, pulling Obito out and slinging him across the battleground. Obito moved his arms up, blocking a kick to the chest, knocking the foot out of the way and slamming his fist into the man's face.

Unperturbed, he pulled a kunai out of his sleeve and sliced upwards, cutting a chunk of Obito's armor, nicking the skin underneath.

Obito sent a wave of sand at the man, knocking him down from the force.

“You know who that is, right!?” Mako called, rushing up to him.

He watched the man fight against the sand as they caught their breath.

He looked over to her, nodding fast. “Yeah.”

Sasuke Uchiha.

“Uchiha.” Mako breathed, fear in her voice. Obito felt his chest tighten as he sent another wave of sand. They both held their breath as the sand stilled. It began to go into a tighter and tighter ball.

“Be alert.” Obito ordered, bending his knees, closing his eyes as he repaired any cracks in his armor.

He heard Mako crouch, adjusting her feet under the wooden debris.

Suddenly, there was an explosion. Obito threw a wall of sand up. The sand wall cracked and shuddered as *snakes* broke through his wall. He curled his lip as they wiggled and squirmed through the holes they

made, their mouths open, their tiny tongues flickering, venom dripping from their fangs. He kicked one as it leapt at him, sending it several hundred feet.

“Snakes!?” Obito said as they jumped back and then apart. He punched a snake in the air, blocking as Sasuke Uchiha dashed towards him, the man's red eyes spinning. “No one ever said anything about fucking *snakes* .”

He watched the man's feet, making sure not to look in his eyes. Obito threw a high block and a side block, opening the man's chest. In quick, rapid successions, he brought his hand to his hip and thrust it forward, palm aimed at his sternum.

There was a sick *crack* .

The man's red eyes faded to onyx as they widened in pain. Obito struck again with his left fist to the chest. The man slammed into a wall of sand, bouncing back into an charka laden hook kick to the jaw.

Uchiha Sasuke skidded across the ground, face first in the dirt and sand.

The only sound was the rustling of leaves and sand shifting in the air.

Obito was breathing heavily as he and Mako regrouped where he left his gourd. He let his armor fall to join the rest of the sand as it traveled back to its container.

“Shit.” Mako breathed, looking up to him. He pressed his hand to his face, letting green chakra heal the gash. “What the fuck was that?”

“I don't know.” Obito said softly.

“Isn't he supposed to have people with him?”

Obito watched as the man twitched slightly, but didn't move. Obito took off. “He *will not* be getting up again.

“Obito...don't kill him.” Mako said lowly.

Obito’s heart raced in his head as he rushed to pick up his gourd, strapping it to his back. He looked at Mako, who was watching him with wide eyes. “Be on your guard.”

He turned, rushing towards him and kicked the man hard in the

already shattered ribs, picking him up with his foot and turning him over.

He watched as Uchiha Sasuke winced his eyes blinking open slowly. Obito held out a hand and his sand wrapped around Uchiha's eyes like a mask.

Anger coursed through him. And frustration. Because as much as he wanted to kill him.

I can't.

He was exhausted. *They* were exhausted. They were at the edge of Wind and Leaf, days from back up.

He was running low on chakra and his mother's warnings blared in his head.

Don't take him lightly.

Obito wanted nothing more than to end it here and now, but it everything in him *and* Mako to incapacitate him.

Killing him wouldn't be so easy.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't get what he wanted.

"I have some questions for you, Uchiha." Obito pressed his boot on Uchiha Sasuke's face. Obito's sand poured out of his gourd, covering the man and pressing him into the ground.

Uchiha looked in his direction, "Suna!?" He smirked, "This isn't the first time I've gone against the sand of Suna." Though Obito knew he couldn't see him, he flinched.

"Keep those eyes away, Uchiha."

Uchiha shifted. Obito winced, pressuring his sand. Mako put her hands on his back, almost willing chakra into him.

"I don't need to see you to destroy you."

Obito pressed his foot down lightly. "You don't understand your situation." Obito willed his voice to be stronger. "I could crush your little stupid skull to a million pieces." He could if he had any chakra left, but if he messed up and passed out, "But I just want to know why you attacked us." Uchiha tried to move, but Obito pressed his foot

harder. There was a crack and blood seeped out of his nose.

“You don't seem to understand.” Obito repeated, his adrenaline souring. “You're under my control.” For now. He looked back at Mako before looking back down at Uchiha. “Answer my question. Why did you attack us?!”

Sasuke Uchiha didn't speak.

“I don't know if he can breathe,”

Obito stared at Mako. “I'm not healing him.”

“Like I would want your hands on me.”

“My foot is. That’s all you get.” Obito looked to Mako, who held a kunai at the ready. Obito sighed. “Listen, just tell me why you attacked us, so I can send you on your little way and we can keep this from turning into a war between two strongly allied countries.”

“Like you could truly beat me, sand boy.” The Uchiha coughed. A little blood came up. “I've fought your leader and *won* .”

Obito snorted. “You've got my foot in your face and your ribs are in a million pieces.” *Tsunade's going to kill me* .

Unless your mother does it first.

“I caused him to completely come apart. To call upon the monster inside.”

Obito looked down. He was draining fast. “Good for you.”

Find a way out. Mako’s face lit up. She pulled off her back and started rummaging.

Suddenly it got quiet. Obito looked around at the sound of birds chirping.

“What?”

“Obito!” He looked down and his eyes widened. The Uchiha's hand was glowing blue as a deafening sound of birds filled the area. He jumped back, sand tightening around the man's wrist and ankles as Mako jumped forward and slammed a foot into the man's sternum.

He disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The birds sounded from behind them.

Anger and fear. Obito twisted, move a sand wave over Uchiha before dashing forward.Obito planted his feet firmly, twisting his hips and charging chakra through his right arm, as he put all his power into an uppercut.

The ground shook as Uchiha was shot into the air. Mako came from above with an axe kick, crashing him into the sea of sand before Obito used the last of his *everything* to form a sand coffin. Something flew by his face and Obito watched as three senbon found purchase in Uchiha's neck.

"Yes!" Mako hissed. "Poison. Courtesy of Hachiko and your mom!"

Obito watched as it was almost instantaneous.

Uchiha slumped in his coffin.

They stood like that until the forest came back to life.

Obito let it go, collapsing onto the ground.

Mako rushed to him as the sand fell around them unmoving.

"Tie him up." Obito gasped. "We'll need to take him back to Konoha."

III

"Why-" Mako seethed through gritted teeth "Why do I have to carry him!?"

Obito waved his hand. Mako wasn't just dragging the Uchiha, but carrying his gourd. Obito was lucky to have enough energy to trail after Mako.

"You're doing great!"

Mako looked back, worry on her face. "You too, Haruno."

" *Ha-runo* !?"

"Damnit, Mako." He cursed. Of all the times for that bastard to wake up.

Obito trudged forward. pulling out on of the senbon Mako gave him. They stopped as he collapsed next to him, breathing heavy as he

pressed his hand to Uchiha's neck.

" *Ha-* "

"-Nuno." Obito said clearly. "Hanuno. Go back to sleep, old man."

The man chuckled. "Haruno. That fucking bitch." Obito froze. Uchiha continued, "Fucking bitch. She was the worst decision of my life."

"Sure you were hers, Mr. Pleasantries." Obito muttered, pressing the senbon to his neck.

"You're right." Sasuke stopped fighting against his holds. "I am. Because when I find her-she's going right back in my Tsukuyomi."

"Please tell me that it isn't a sex dungeon." Obito pressed the senbon into his skin. He wouldn't be awake much longer.

Sasuke was silent for a moment before muttering almost to himself. "Inside my eyes I will be able to see all of the deception and she *will* be punished." Obito jammed the poison stick hard into his neck. Uchiha didn't seem as phased this time. Obito grabbed another. "When I get done with her, she'll be nothing but an empty shell."

"Obi-" Obito jammed the senbon hard into his neck. It pierced the other side. Sasuke's face widened before he slumped back against the ground.

He turned back to Mako, his voice even. "I don't think he'll wake up the rest of this trip."

III

Mako dumped the man at the gate. "We found him like that."

The guards looked at each other. "With his face smashed in? That...that looks pretty fresh."

Obito leaned heavily into Mako. "I need five before we head back."

"Five minutes or five days?"

"Call the Hokage." One whispered. The other took off and the man stood. "Thank you for returning him...alive."

"You seem happy to hear that." Mako replied.

The guy frowned, looking between the Suna shinobi. “He...likes to pick fights.” The guy eyed Obito. “Where's the rest of his team?”

Obito looked at Mako, who shrugged. “He didn't have-”

“There you are.” Obito lazily looked behind him.

“Sai!” The guard gasped. “Where have you been!? Why weren't you with-.”

“He escaped.” The man's smile was giving Obito the creeps. It was too pleasant. The man closed his eyes and tilted his head to the side. “You know how he is.”

Obito glanced at Mako, and then the guard. “You all are quite the duo. Finding a traitor bleeding to death in the woods.”

The guard threw up his arms. “I don't even want to know.” He walked back to his post.

“You were very nice to bring the very injured Sasuke-traitor home.” He looked up at the guard, “The Hokage should grant them a reward.”

At least we’re in Konoha. Obito looked at Mako. “Let’s find a hotel. I want to rest and get out of here before he wakes up-”

Uchiha moaned loudly, making Obito swear. “A nice tree,” Obito needed a nap. “Listen, we've really got to go-”

“Daddy!” Obito cringed at the high pitched scream. A small girl ran at full speed towards them, stopping at the sight of Uchiha. She had long black hair with pale skin that matched Uchiha’s perfectly. She screamed. Obito cringed at the sound. The girl turned, her face red. “You did this!” She ran up to Obito and kicked at his shin.

Obito fell, his body shaking. She screamed louder.

Obito’s world spun. “The little shit…” Mako scrambled to pick him up. He was almost twice the size of Mako.

Sai took his weight.

“Shina!” The girl’s scowl disappeared and her eyes began watering before she turned to a woman running this way.

“Mommy!” She wailed. “The evil sand ninja almost killed Daddy!”

Obito's mouth fell open. “ *Daddy?* ”

Obito’s legs buckled beneath him. Tears prickled his eyes as he found it hard to breathe.

He closed his eyes. His mom flashed behind his eyes. *I wish* -

Obito felt his consciousness slip as he saw a flash of yellow and eyes the same shade as Mina’s.

Then darkness.

III

Uzumaki Naruto was cackling over his ramen bowl. “You beat the shit out of him?” Obito scowled. He was still exhausted, but after a long night’s sleep he could focus on what had happened the day before.

“He attacked us first! With *snakes.* ” Naruto was laughing harder. Obito jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “And that other guy made it seem like he might have been there the whole time! He didn’t stop me. He didn't do shit.”

“Yeah, well, Sai doesn’t like him-” Naruto called for another bowl. He started laughing again. “You smashed his face in!”

“You don’t seem too concerned that a Suna ninja attacked your-”

“Ah! Obito-kun! You’re family!” The Hokage swung an arm around the boy. Guilt settled in Obito's stomach at the cheerful smile on the Hokage's face. “I can’t get mad at you!”

Obito stared at a mass of blond hair. “Thanks. I guess...” He watched two more bowls were delivered and Naruto thanked the woman behind the counter and dug in.

“Dig in! You need your strength!” Naruto laughed.

But Obito wasn’t hungry. His stomach swirled dangerously with the bowl he’d already eaten.

“I have to know, who's the kid?” He felt his stomach churn and his heart start pounding.

Naruto looked up, “Who? Shina?” Naruto gestured to his bowl, “Eat.” He commanded.

Obito swirled his noodles.

“Shina is who you think she is. She’s Sasuke’s kid.”

Obito looked over at Naruto, who looked like he might be sick too. “She’s four.” His eyes shone, “Suna isn’t the only one with secret kids.” He gestured to Obito, “I even asked Gaara the best way to keep a village of gossipy ninjas from talking about the village's biggest-not-so-big secret.”

“Sasuke used to be real bad. Really broody. It would affect others in the village. I’d send him out on long missions with a few ANBU, or Kakashi-sensei, or Sai, just to give everyone a breather.

“He was out with Sai for three days and…” Naruto shrugged, “he came back with this woman.”

Obito stared incredulously at the Hoakge.

Naruto ran a hand through his hair. “She was from some small village on the edge of Fire. She was impressed by his 'good looks' and 'calm demeanor. At least, that’s what she told my wife.

“So, he brought her back. After six months, they moved into the compound and…he stops his brooding and his anger and…it all falls away.” Naruto gives him a *look* . “From the village gossip, she's not the smartest, but she’s unbelievably kind. And patient. And a doting housewife. Leaves the compound only to buy a few groceries or other *domestic* supplies. But it wasn't until four years ago that they had their first child. A girl.”

“ *First* ?”

Naruto looked guilty at his noodles. “They have two. Two girls.

“And they’ve been good for him! He's a lot calmer now. *In* the village. But, when he gets out...he becomes a bit rambunctious.”

“He tried to kill me. For no reason.”

Naruto nodded, “I’ll deal with that. I’ll talk to Gaara. We’ll get it sorted out.

“It won’t be easy.” Naruto swore.

Anger built up in Obito. “Sounds like Uchiha’s got it pretty easy. Got exactly what he wanted.” His mind went to his single mother who has

catered her entire life around hiding from this one man.

A man who has a loving little family.

Obito felt sick.

He wanted to take his bowl of ramen and hurl it into the side of the stand.

Instead he just deflated.

“What is a Tsukuyomi anyway?”

“Tsukuyomi?”

Obito pushed his noodles to Naruto, “Sasuke said he'd put her back there when he found her again.” He mumbled, not looking at the Hokage. “Find out all her traitorous lies, or something.” He turned to look at Naruto, who's eyes were wide and glistening. “Hokage-sama, what is the Tsu-”Obito paused. Naruto's blue, glistening eyes, flashed red.

And then suddenly, Naruto blinked. He perked up and looked around, focusing on Obito. He smiled brightly. “I have to go.” His voice was calm and soft, unnerving. Naruto was almost out of the stall as Obito felt the words fall from his lips, cringing as soon as they hit the air.

“She did it for you.” There was a pulse of energy that made every hair on Obito's body stand on end. It was like electricity. Dangerous electricity.

This was one of those things Gaara-jii let slip one night after training, shortly after the chuunin exams. From the tone that Gaara-jii had used, it wasn't common knowledge. That maybe *he* wasn’t even supposed to know.

And now he knew for sure that hadn’t been common knowledge. He felt his ANBU senses screaming as he pressed himself back on the counter. Naruto turned back to look at him. It was then, with cold, blue eyes flickering red, did Obito realize that this *was* the same Naruto Gaara-jii had told him about.

The Uzumaki Naruto of legend.

“For me *how* .” It wasn’t a request.

Obito swore he saw an aura of tails flicker behind the Hokage.

“She doesn't regret it.” He wasn't actually sure if she felt that way, but it seemed like something she would say, even if she did every day.

Naruto turned and Obito felt like he could breathe again. He watched as Naruto’s Hokage robes billowed behind him as he left the stall. Leaving two bowls of uneaten ramen behind.

III

“What’d you do to my dad?” Mina sat behind him her bathroom, the door open with her mother just down the hall. Mako was resting at Shikamaru’s and they were going to leave at the first sign of daybreak. He had his eyes closed as she massaged the pink dye into his roots.

He didn't want to be Obito right now. Not really.

He really wanted to be home. With his mother. Obito wanted to leave tonight, but Mako insisted he needed another long night of rest. They'd been through a lot and had three days of travel in front of them. He wanted to make it back in two, even if that meant carrying Mako half way.

Mina had been talking. “He was real quiet when he got home tonight. And he’s never quite.”

“We had a serious conversation.” He looked out a large bay window at the end of the hall. Even from here he could see the village was so green and full of life. The sun hadn't completely set; little lights from homes mixed with the lights from the sun. “And I probably said something I shouldn't have said.” He said distantly.

Her hands paused on his scalp. “Obito?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Obito whispered. He played with the mask at his neck.

After a few seconds of silence, Mina spoke softly, “Did you tell him about the trade?” He shifted, looking up to her. She pressed her lips together, looking out the bathroom before closing the door. She leaned over him, her lips brushing his ear, “Your mother for the Hokageship?” His eyes widened. She sighed, resuming her work on his head. “He’ll be fine.” She said curtly. “He knows he was the best for the job. Everyone knows that.”

“But he was given the job on false pretenses.” He turned back around. “I think your dad is more concerned that if it wasn’t for him, she

wouldn’t have had to leave. That because of him, she'd still be here, with a family.”

Mina hummed softly, “She has a family. It’s small, but she’s got you.” She release his head and pushed him up gently. He sat up straight, listening to her hum as she rinsed her hands in the basin next to her. They sat in silence except for the sound of the water.

After a few minutes she pulled on his shoulders, “Let me make sure I didn’t get any on you.” He looked up at her as she moved around him. She grabbed a rag and carefully outlined his face. His toes tingled as his stomach erupted into butterflies. “I'm glad you're here.” She whispered. Hesitantly, she raised a hand to his face. He felt his body heat up as she leaned in, her lips brushing his.

His hands came up to her hips, “We have twenty minutes.”

She hummed, “What to do?” Her lips brushed his.

“Indeed.” Obito jumped as the door banged open. An angry Uzumaki Hinata stood with her hands on her hips.

“Door open.” She said in her scary, soft voice.

Mina huffed, her cheeks puffing out. Obito couldn’t help but grin.

Lineages and Birthrites

They left early the next day. The dew hadn't yet dried on the forest floor.

"Sorry the Hokage couldn't be here to send you off." Mina said as they stood at the gate. Obito, again in his ANBU gear, could still see specks of Sasuke's blood in the dirt. "Hokage business and stuff." She looked from Obito to Mako. "But he promised to write the Kazekage thank him for all of you returning Sasuke Uchiha to our village." She eyed the guards. "And he wanted me to remind you that Suna ninja are always welcome in our village." She bowed.

Obito bowed. "Thank you."

"Someone will be back in a few weeks. The scroll was compromised and needs to be recoded."

Mina's eyes shined, but she kept their talk professional. "I will relay that to the Hokage."

Obito stared at Mina, who looked at anything but him. Mako's presence seemed to make things more awkward. "Have-a safe...trip..." Mina said awkwardly.

"Thank-thank you." He mumbled. After a few more minutes, Mina turned and walked away.

"Come on." Mako sounded like she was holding back a giggle. The guards, on the other hand, weren't holding back their amusement.

They walked into the thickening woods in silence before they broke out in a run.

"You didn't come back last night." Mako said cheekily as they jumped from tree to tree.

Obito shrugged, his mask covering his blush. "I had a lot on my mind." After he took left the Uzumaki home *very* late, (when her mother woke him from Mina's bedroom floor when Naruto came home), he roamed the village, trying to digest everything. "Why did no one say anything about Uchiha having a kid?"

"Imagine Ino telling your mother that while she has to live in exile, Uchiha not only moved on, but is finally getting his dream." She

looked over at him, moving her mask to the side. “Who wants to give anyone *that* news?” After a few moments in silence, Mako whispered softly. “Maybe she does know...”

They traveled in silence for the rest of the day, only talking about inconsequential things as they set up camp.

“Get some rest, I’ll take first watch.” He said softly. She didn’t argue as she pulled out her sleeping bag and crawled inside their tent and was asleep in seconds.

He frowned, pulling down his mask and staring out into the woods, feeling empty.

It had been a long few days. He tried to quiet the anger building inside him, but it wouldn’t go away.

Uchiha had a family. A loving one.

And he couldn’t even tell his mom what had happened over the last few days.

Or tell her about Mina.

He sighed, kicking his feet out and pulling out his book from his hip bag. He was twenty pages in when he heard the crackling of twigs into the forest. He froze. He looked over to see Mako awake, but not so alert, holding a kunai.

He closed his book quietly and rose, twirling a kunai in his fingers as he stayed crouched, ears searching.

A branch snapped. He let his kunai fly.

He heard a *giggle.*

Mako was at his side as sand dotted their line of vision, creating a dusting in their small clearing. One look at Mako showed she felt the same as him. *Not in the mood* .

They took slow movements away from the campsite, slowly moving apart as they heard trampling.

They braced themselves as the bushes and fallen leaves started to tremble on the ground.

Then the sound of *howling* filled the trees.

“What the-”

A large dark mass came jumping out of a nearby bush, Obito shifted his stance, ready for the attack when suddenly it all stopped. Heavy breathing filled the trees as Obito looked down to see a large dog stopped at his feet. He sat tall but his rear end wriggled furiously against the ground. And then it *spoke*. “It's *you* !” Obito jumped back and Mako cursed in surprise.

It wasn't a large dog. It was a large dog and a small dog on its head.

A pug.

An old pug by the gray around his nose. It held up a small, perfectly pink paw. “Hello, Hatake.” The dog sat straight on the big dog's head, leaning over to scratch his ear. His little Konoha headband threatened to fall off as he scratched. The big dog was sniffing his leg madly.

Obito looked at Mako, who had a bright smile on her face.

“Uh...I’m not-”

“I'm sure you know why we're here, so let's cut to the chase. We don't have a lot of time and we need to get back.” The big dog let out a gruff deep 'woof' but continued his sniffing.

Sand slowly cleared from the air around them. “Sorry?”

The little pug looked up to him. “Sorry, what, pup?”

“Pup? What, who-”

Obito was pretty sure the pug was looking at him and Mako at the same time. “I'm Pakkun, of course.” The little dog said, “and this is Bull, of course.”

“Of course, Obito.” Mako said in a voice a bit higher than her normal voice. She was petting Bull, who ignored her as he continued to sniff him.

“Of course.”

The pug pressed to the ground. He started sniffing around. “Got any meat?”

“Uh-”

The other dog barked, and Pakkun sat, frowning. “You'll need to start traveling with meat, boy.”

“Why?” Obito said cautiously.

Pakkun frowned. “Because the new team is rowdy and young!” Pakkun said in a matter of fact voice. “They'll be expecting it! But don't worry, that phase fades. You know how pups are. Always wanting-”

“New team? I'm sorry but who-?”

The pug hesitated, scowling slightly. “Is this déjà vu, Bull or what?” He looked back to the big, wiggling dog. “Pups,”

Bull woofed in agreement.

“You are you calling a pup?”

“You of course.” Mako was enjoying this too much.

Obito growled.

The pug growled back. The bulldog barked loudly. The bark echoed for a few seconds. The pug regained his composure. “I’m Pakkun, and this is-”

“Bull, yes, but who are you?”

“Kakashi's ninken.” It was Mako who spoke. Obito's eyes widened, turning to look at Mako as his heart soared in his chest. “You've heard of Kakashi's-”

“Of course I have!” Obito started wiggling as much as Bull. “I've heard great stories of your heroism!”

It seemed to be the right thing to say to the little pug. He seems pleased.

“If you're here, does that mean he’s-”

“Boss isn’t here. We followed your scent from the village.”

Obito frowned, his stomach dropped a bit. “I see.”

“We’ve been meaning to find you sooner, but it’s hard to sneak away from Boss.” Bull nodded in agreement.

“Sneak away?”

Pakkun scratched his ear again, “I don’t get involved even in Boss’ affairs. I’m just a dog, after all, but I know when to keep my mouth shut and me being the one to tell him about you is not the way of the pact.” Obito raised a brow. Pakkun shrugged, “I’m not breaking the news to him. That’s his mates’ job.”

“He means your mom-”

“I know what he means!” Obito snapped. His elation and glee from a few moments ago came crashing back down to realty. “He really has no idea?” *Of course not* .

The two older dogs looked at each other before Pakkun continued. “He's spoken of a young boy from Suna, named Obito, but I don't think he's thought it through. Well, I’m sure he’s thought of *that* senerio. Boss ain’t stupid after all…” He shifted. “But he don't have the nose we got.”

“Ah, cheer up, kid. It'll happens when it’s supposed ‘ta. It's the dog's way.” He cleared his throat. “We’re not here for that. We’re here on business.”

“Business?”

Pakkun barked. “We’re here to do what should have been done years ago.” Bull started wiggling more now. “We’re here to make your blood contract.”

III

Obito stuck his thumb in his mouth as he looked down at a group of small puppies.

“You’ll have eight ninken.” Pakkun said with more authority than Obito thought a dog his size could muster. “Paku will lead this pack of mangey mutts.” A small, young pug gave a joyful yelp. “But they’ll listen to you.”

Obito nodded, looking at Mako. “Cool.”

“You will train them to be your own unique team.”

“Do we get to make those little jackets for them?”

Pakkun scoffed at Mako’s question. “My wife makes them.” He shook

his head before turning his attention back to Obito. “You are carrying on your birth rite, passed down through the Hatake family for generations.” Obito nodded.

Bull let out a small whine and a larger dog, taller than Obito, appeared, a scroll tied around its neck. Pakkun moved around the small pack to the giant dog. “With your blood and the blood of your pack leader you will seal these ninken to yourself. You will protect them as they protect you and your comrades. You are at each other's mercy.”

Obito grinned, his fingers trembling. The giant scroll unwound at Pakkun ran to Obito's feet. “Bend down, pup.” Obito did as he was told. Pakkun bit Obito’s palm hard, blood dripping onto the scroll. He bit the young pug's ear and the two’s blood swirled together on the scroll. Smoke rose from the paper and with a *poof* it was gone.

Pakkun nodded. “It is done.” He made his way back to Bull. “We have to get back to the village. Good luck young, Hatake!”

With a puff of smoke they were gone.

The two ninja and 8 dogs sat in silence for a few minutes.

“Well, this has been interesting.” Mako yawned. “But I’m going to bed.”

A few of the dogs barked in agreement and tottered after her. Only the little pug, Paku remained.

“You will be easy to find!” Paku wiggled as Obito stood, the dog at his heels.

“Oh yeah? Because I have pink hair?” Obito bent down and scratched the pups head. “Because the pink is only temporary.

Paku laughed. “No! You smell like Pakkun-sama!”

Obito froze. “Wha?”

“Yeah! You must use the same shampoo!”

III

Sakura sat in the living room, in complete bliss. Ino was in the kitchen, brewing tea. Her friend bustled back in the room and Sakura couldn’t help but smile widely.

She always liked surprise visits.

Ino had been catching her up on all the latest gossip around Konoha when she heard the door open gently and close just as softly. Ino came into the room, obviously oblivious, speaking too fast for Sakura to keep up as she listened to the soft padding of footsteps. She caught sight of a flash of pink. She tried to keep her attention on Ino as she watched her son pad silently behind her, sitting on the couch next to Ino, her back turned to him and started mimicking her movements.

Suddenly, Ino's elbow shot out.

Obito caught it grinning. "So! You really were a ninja!"

Ino rolled her eyes. "Am!" Ino looked back at him. "Why is your hair pink?"

"That is classified." He said seriously, leaning against Ino's shoulder. "Listen, I have to steal my mother for a moment."

"Why?"

"Because something happened on my last mission and it's a *family discussion* ." He said to Ino, glaring. "We discuss *new additions to families* in this house."

Ino opened her mouth, but slowly closed her mouth. Sakura felt anger building up. *"Obito."*

"I'll...be in the kitchen." Ino rose, leaving the living room and squealed.

Obito cringed as there was light bark from the hall.

"Obito-" Confusion coursed through Sakura as she jumped to her feet, running after her friend. She gasped. It was the smallest, cutest, littlest pug she'd ever seen. He was tan with black ears and a black face. He wore a small Suna headband.

He was adorable.

"Oh my goodness!" She said, scooping him up. "He's so adorable!" Her smile was hurting her face as she turned to her son who now stood right behind her. Her heart dancing in her chest. "Where did you-"

"Pakkun."

The puppy whined in Sakura's arms. She relaxed her grip and the pug jumped from her hands and moved to Obito's feet.

“Pak-”

“He found us in the woods in the Fire country. Said it was my 'birthright.'” His grin was splitting his face. “Kept calling me Hatake.” He bent down and picked up the pug.

He shrugged. “I'm not sure how we'd incorporate them into battle, but we'll figure it out.”

“We're great for tracking!” The puppy yipped.

Sakura frowned. Her heart tightened. She didn't realize how much she missed Kakashi's little companions until now. She walked over to him and scratched his head.

“Welcome to the family little guy.”

“And the rest of us!”

There was a low whining from deep in the hall. Sakura's eyes widened. “How many?”

Obito grinned sheepishly. “Eight.”

III

“I don't get why you didn't tell her.” Obito said with slight scorn in his voice. Ino had offered to go dog shopping with him as Sakura became accustomed to having dogs in the house. When they left, she and the eight puppies were sprawled on the couch.

“Obito-”

“What is the Tsukuyomi?”

“Obi-”

“ *Ino* .”

She sighed, picking up a chew toy and gently placing it back in the bin. “The Tsukuyomi is a genjutsu. The Uchiha can use their eyes to transport you to a place in your head. It's...it's a very good interrogation technique.” She didn't look to him. “Even better at torture.” She sighed.

“Torture,”

Ino gave him a look. “Which is what he did to your mom. Which is why she wants you to have nothing to do with him. It’s why she decided to be passive rather than fight.” Ino looked up to him. “One of my family's expertise is obtaining information by going into people's minds. We just go in and can move around with their knowledge or not. I've had it done to me before. Multiple times, so I can understand what it is I'm doing.” She looked at some leashes, frowning. “I can't imagine the horrors she was put through. She won't talk about it and I'm not going to push it out. PTSD works that way.”

“That guy tortured her.” Obito, anger rose like bile in his throat. “He tortured her, practically destroyed her life, and you don't think she has the right to tell her about his happy little shitty family?”

“Obito, she knows.”

He spun around. Ino was looking at giant tug ropes. She was frowning. “Tsunade told her. When she found out the woman was pregnant.” Ino shrugged. “She hasn't asked me about him. About his family.” She looked at Obito and smiled weakly. “Which is great because I don't want to know anything about them.” Her lips quivered weakly. “No one really does.”

They bought a few giant dog beds, bowls, toys, and leashes before heading back home.

“I dyed my hair because on my last mission we had a run in with Uchiha.” Ino turned to look at him. “And it didn't end well. For him.” He looked at her, who was gaping at him. He continued. “He started telling me about how he trapped Mom in the Tsukuyomi. About how if he finds her, he'll do it again.”

Ino cupped her mouth, her face paled. “Obito-”

“And-I-I told Naruto-I told Naruto about mother being trapped in the Tsukuyomi.” Ino looked like he'd slapped her. “I don't know how he's taking it. So-so just be prepared.”

Ino took a shaky breath and they continued their trek back home in silence.

When they entered the house, they both felt more at ease, seeing Sakura reading, probably not having moved since they left. She was scratching one's ear, smiling contently.

“Everything will be alright.” Obito said to Ino.

“I hope so.”

Father and Son

Chapter Notes

Seventeen

Obito was on edge as he and Team Temari entered Konoha.

The Hokage requested for them to redeliver the scroll personally.

And the usual carefree leader was cold and professional as he dismissed them.

“Hey, Babito,” Hachiko whispered. “Did he find out about you and his daughter?”

“I will murder you.” He seethed as they passed Konoha guards. He felt slightly off as Hachiko's face wasn't full of its usual teasing smiles. It was serious.

Obito couldn't shake that something serious was about to happen.

III

Kakashi flipped open Tactics and rolled his eyes.

He really hated his job. He should really retire. Become a professional dog walker. Or perhaps do the audio books for Icha Icha. Perhaps start his own Icha Icha fanfiction publication. Jiraya would be proud.

His eyes fell from the page to the two sitting on a fallen tree turned makeshift bench in the 'secluded woods' between training grounds two and three. It was the perfect spot really to come and be alone.

Unless you're the Hokage's oldest daughter. Then it was the perfect spot to be alone with Kakashi.

Luckily, for Kakashi, they were just sitting there. Holding hands as they whispered sweet nothings into each others’ ears. Kakashi had to admit-her carefree smile as the boy whispered into her ear was almost breathtaking. If he didn't remember her trying to pull his hair out when she was two, smiling in almost the same way. She giggled as he moved somehow closer and Kakashi just sighed, turning back to his book.

Teenagers. He was glad he never was one.

But, despite himself, and the skin crawling disgust this whole situation caused him, Kakashi was pleased with Mina's choice. If he had a child he certainly wouldn't mind them whispering sweet nothing on a makeshift bench with Obito 'The Sandman' Suna. He actually doesn't know his last name. Strangely no one called him by it. Kakashi figured he was like Gaara; Mysterious in origin with no last name.

Or Suna was different in more than just sand.

Obito was charming, skilled, caring of others, lived very far away, and seemed to be clean except for a bit of grainy sand.

Though... Kakashi turned a page rather loudly from his perch in a tree, *he lacks focus when it comes to girls.* Neither kids were foreseeing an attack, or even noticing the leaves around them as they gaze so deeply into each other's eyes. The gourd totting boy didn't even have his signature back piece.

He was sporting dark blue shorts and a short sleeve shirt. His bubblegum pink hair was bright against the green forest. Mina shifted, bringing her unclasped hand to the boy's face. He dipped his face closer, their noses brushing. They were still only talking, though she was practically sitting in his lap. Kakashi really hoped they were exchanging battle strategies.

Kakashi let his eyes roam back to the words on his page. Why did he even let himself get suckered into these stupid 'missions' by that idiot Hokage? It made him feel old and (even more) perverted.

Mina's giggling was cut off. Kakashi wanted to gag. He really shouldn't be here.

But it reminded him of a different time. Not when he was a teenager, or even a twenty something, but a thirty something.

Thirty something with Sakura. There were more than a few occasions they had found themselves in these very woods and- *ahem* -showed up these young kids.

Kakashi's lip curled.

Which is acceptable since little Mina is still a small child, and Obito is a young gentlemen.

Kakashi frowned as Sakura's mischievously smiling face flashed against his Sharingan. There was more rustling going on below him. He wasn't going to look.

He thought instead what Obito's parents would think. He knew that if the Hokage ever found out about this little rendezvous, or the *other* ones (definitely others), there would be a war between Konoha and Suna. He was the Kazekage's apprentice? Son maybe? He quickly dismissed that thought. He snuck a glance and regretted it.

Obito's shirt was off. Kakashi grimaced as he saw where little Mina's hands were-

Kakashi snapped his book closed and was gone in a poof of smoke. He didn't need to stick around to see/hear where this was going.

He landed, feeling slightly dirty in his apartment. He looked down at his book and tossed it on the bed.

Would the Kazekage really blame Naruto for starting a war? Kakashi surely wouldn't. Not if it was his daughter.

Kakashi thought for half a second about going back and at least scaring them back into their clothes (or out of each others). But...part of him didn't really care. They weren't his kids. And a ninja's life could end at any minute. Right? Must live in the moment?

He sighed loudly looking down at his book.

"Hopefully that book gave him some pointers." Kakashi cursed himself for *that* thought before heading towards his shower.

III

He reappeared in his apartment, crossing with wide steps to a little cupboard in the corner of his room. Sakura had always called it his shrine.

He bent down and opened the doors. Inside were his crisp first editions of the whole Icha Icha series, all tucked nicely in the right corner. Still in the plastic. The rest of the small cupboard was littered with various copies of various degrees of wear. He tossed the copy Tactics with a small 'clunk' and pulled out a very worn version of Paradise.

He closed the door and walked towards his bed, collapsing in a heap. He flipped open the worn book. His heart softened.

It was his picture of Sakura. It was really the two of them, but he never paid attention to himself. He was old, battered, but smiling (he guessed). It was her smile, her bright, shining eyes that caught his attention. She just looked so happy. So carefree.

She didn't really have any cares then.

Kakashi ignored his heart clenching as his Sharingan flashed an image of the last time he saw her, walking through the market in Suna.

Had she always been there? Did I miss something?

And who was that guy she was with? Kakashi couldn't blame her for finding a new life for herself. A new life without the worries of Sasuke or marriage or drowning in the unhappiness that had become Konoha.

Was she married to that guy? Kakashi frowned. It looked like she lived alone, but there was the door with the seals on it. A roommate? It didn't look like her room was shared. Maybe they were both really neat.

They had always been. He recalled a time where he practically lived at Sakura's little apartment. For three months he was there more than anywhere else and Ino had even made the comment that it looked like no one lived there. Not even Sakura...

He frowned, pulling himself up into a sitting position. He set the picture back in its place between the pages and tossed it on the bed. He bit his thumb hard, watching the blood pool before making the hand signs.

Pakkun appeared lazily on his bed, his small tail wagging slowly.

“Hey boss.”

Kakashi sighed, patting the small dog on the head. The dog hummed happily. They sat in silence.

Kakashi smiled. *What if that was Sakura's boy?* She'd certainly kill him. Kakashi chuckled at the absurdity. *It would be like a game-who could punch the boy to the moon the fastest? The angry Hokage-father? Or the strongest mother in the world?*

He chuckled.

“Hmm?” Pakkun looked up lazily.

Kakashi sighed. “Mina has a boyfriend from Suna. They are in the woods right now.”

Pakkun snorted. “Sounds like someone else I know.”

“Used to know.” He said in a far away voice.

Sakura wasn't married. He hoped.

That guy...he was no one. He hoped.

She still thought about him.

“Ahh...” He patted Pakkun on the head twice before standing up, stretching slightly. “I am an old man who clings onto things too long.”

Pakkun stood and stretched. “You have always been loyal.”

Kakashi nodded. “I like the word loyal. It's better than sad.” He patted his thigh lightly. “Come on, let's go sign a poor boy's death warrant.”

“Sounds like fun.” Pakkun hopped off the bed, following Kakashi's heels.

III

“He owes you some meat. Nice, raw, fatty, meat.”

Kakashi rolled his eyes. “I'm a vegetarian.”

“All the better. You can just give it to me.” Pakkun sat on the bottom step to the Hokage tower and scratched his ear.

But Pakkun was right. He deserved some kind of reward for blatantly lying to the Hokage about the discussion of strengthening the bond between Konoha and Suna. It included less talk and more action.

Even Naruto could appreciate that.

Pakkun paused, his ears perking. Kakashi looked where his was staring. “Ah, speak of the devil.”

A slightly disheveled Obito was walking briskly his way. He wasn't

wearing his breezy shorts (he hoped they weren't still in the forest) but long slim dark brown pants and a short sleeved dark red wrap shirt and a long sleeved black shirt (a doting little copy of the Kazekage-besides the sand colored mask he wore). He was looking down at his gourd strap, and as he got closer, Kakashi noticed he was cursing.

“Sounds like he's running late.” Kakashi murmured to his dog. He got a muffled bark as a response.

As he neared Kakashi, he spun, still distracted by his strap when Kakashi shot an arm out, grabbing his right forearm.

Sand shot out, grasping Kakashi's arm. It squeezed as an ominous cloud circled ahead all before Obito seemed to know what was going on.

The oh-so-clever, witty remark about him shacking up in the forest died on his lips as he looked into confused green eyes. “Sorry-”

His bright green flickered with recognition.

His mind reeled back to his earlier thoughts.

What if he was-

Kakashi searched his face as paused. The boy had bubblegum hair.

But his eyebrows were almost silver.

His grip tightened on the boy’s arm.

Obito looked down at his arm, his brow knitting as the grip of the sand loosened on his arm. He stood straighter as his green eyes swam with emotions Kakashi couldn’t place.

“Hatake-san,”

“Kakashi, please.”

Obito hesitated. He exhaled, nodding, “Kakashi-san,” he licked his lips. “I have-there is something I need to tell you.”

“Alright.”

Obito froze. He didn’t seem to not be expecting that. He visibly swallowed as his other hand came and scratched the side of his cheek,

just like he did when he was nervous. He flushed scarlet. “It's uh...about...”

He looked around. He shook his head and pulled down his mask, fidgeting with it as he pressed his lips together and looked away. With a steadying breath he spoke. “It's about Haruno Sakura, sir.”

Kakashi’s hand twitched on Obito’s arm. “She’s in Suna.” Kakashi whispered.

The boy looked around before slowly nodding. “Yeah,”

Kakashi's world slowed as the boy’s hand left the mask around his neck and he tilted his head and did something Kakashi had never seen Obito of Suna do.

Obito smiled at *him* . A smile Kakashi hadn't seen in more than thirty years. One that was more ingrained in his mind than anything the sharingan could do.

Obito smiled at him like his father had. It was the exact same one.

There was a far away thunk in Kakashi's mind before there was a complete shut down. And then it hit him.

He knew that face. He just never paid any attention to it. It was *his* face.

Obito is-

“No...” He whispered. Those green eyes, the most beautiful, brightest jade he’d ever seen dulled as Kakashi took a step back, almost losing his balance as Pakkun got underfoot.

Suna...

“No.”

He said a little louder.

The boy looked fully panicked. “Listen, Kakashi-san!”

Gears were swirling rapidly in Kakashi's head. He felt light headed, holding onto the boy even tighter. *He’s from Suna. Sakura is in Suna.*

What if-

It was outrageous-outlandish-impossible!

But What if...

But it wasn't outrageous. It made all the sense in the world. *The boy is eighteen. The boy is from Suna. Sakura is in Suna.*

And what if-

What if?

Obito tugged slightly on Kakashi, bringing him to the present. He gripped his arm tighter. The sand played on his arm, but if he let go he felt everything would just fall away.

Obito would disappear. Just like Sakura.

Just like my Obito. Rin. Minato-sensei. Sakumo.

Because Obito is-

“Kakashi-san, sir,” The boy’s voice trembled. He looked paler than normal, making her green eyes pop. “I know you-you said no…but *please.*

“Please, what I have to say is important-” He kept looking around. He spotted something and got a look on his face that matched the way Kakashi was feeling. The boy shook his head, sand falling out the sky, swirling around before whooshing back into his gourd. “Hatake Kakashi, I’m- I’m her-” He winced. He shook his head. The boy froze, his face paling

Kakashi relaxed his grip on the boy’s arm and rounded him, grabbing his other arm. Grounding him.

Kakashi nodded his head. “You’re *what* , Obito.” *Tell me. Tell me-*

“I’m your-”

“When are you Suna Shinobi going to learn your place?” Kakashi had been hanging on a delicate cliff; on a piece of fragile glass as it shattered around him as he heard the deep, angry, voice of the very last person he wanted to see.

Uchiha Sasuke stood, watching, holding his little daughter's hand.

Something behind Obito’s eyes cracked. Kakashi gripped his arms,

“Obito?”

Everything shifted in slow motion.

A roaring wind caught Kakashi off-guard as he heard a distant screaming. He felt his fingers ripped from the boy's arm as he felt like his ears were boxed in.

Wind and sand whirled harshly and in only seconds it was over.

The sand storm ended, small specks of sand visibly hanging almost crystallized in the air. Each one a deadly grain to be used by this young boy. The Uchiha girl was sobbing quietly by herself. Kakashi saw, inches from him, the Hokage.

“Drop him,” Naruto's voice made Kakashi shiver. It was a gritty voice, mixed with the nine-tails. Kakashi could see small wisp of red chakra flicking off the Hokage. ANBU surrounded them. Naruto, who was much shorter than Obito, had the young boy on his knees in a headlock.

Naruto's hands pressed hard against the boy's head whose arms were behind his head. He would not let the Hokage press his head down, holding it high. His green eyes were shining, red contrasting the green as snot dripped from his nose. He was breathing deeply through gritted teeth. “Drop. Him.” Kakashi watched Naruto's eyes flicker red ever so quickly.

“Da-ddy!” Kakashi's head snapped and saw the small Uchiha girl, unharmed, clawing at a mound of sand. With Sasuke's head sticking out. His red eyes swirled dangerously, but otherwise calm. As he breathed in, Kakashi watched the sand tighten. Kakashi looked back to the cluster of ANBU.

“Drop-”

“No.” Kakashi had seen many emotions with this boy over the years, but anger-no this wasn't anger. Anger didn't properly convey what was shining in that young boy's eyes. “He must be punished.” Kakashi felt his eyes burn with the emotion in the boy’s voice. “For everything he's done to us!” His voice cracked as the Hokage shoved his face down. “For what he *keeps* -”

“This isn’t the way to do this, Obito,” Naruto said forcefully. “This isn’t-”

“I’ve been doing it how everyone else wants for long enough!” Obito’s voice cracked. “I’m going to do this-”

“Obito...” Kakashi ‘s voice was low and full of an emotion he couldn't name. He couldn’t name until he heard him out.

And seeing Obito like this ripped at his heart.

“Obito, you have something important to tell me right?

“Let him go.” And like a breath, sand dropped. It swirled quickly around the air, creating a cloud of dust before swirling back in the gourd.

Naruto still had Obito in a headlock.

Sasuke, who looked slightly worse for wear, brushed the sand off his wrinkled clothes, his daughter tried to rush him, but he held her at arm's length.

Slowly the Hokage dropped Obito and ANBU backed up. The boy stood straight and grabbed his upper arm. With a crack he slammed his shoulder back in place.

Kakahsi moved past Naruto. He carefully cupped Obito’s neck. He brought their foreheads together. Obito was taller than him, bigger in a lot of aspects.

But he trembled in Kakashi’s hold.

“Come on,” Kakashi whispered. “Let’s go have that talk-”

“You-” Sasuke came storming towards the boy, the sound of birds echoing. Kakashi jumped in front of Obito, making Sasuke stop in his tracks. He looked from Kakashi to the boy. “Using Kakashi-sensei as a shield?”

“It’s better than bringing you child as a shield.” Obito said darkly, “You coward.”

Sasuke tried to push past Kakashi, but he held him firm. “Like I would-”

“Wouldn't put it past you, you put innocent-”

No, Obito, don’t-

“Obito of Suna, leave my village immediately.” Naruto sounded more tired than angry. Kakashi looked back at Naruto, who was staring at him, Kakashi. The girl continued to cry.

“Obito!” Kakashi turned to see Obito’s team standing with ANBU guards. And one red headed girl from Konoha.

“Obito must leave the village.” Naruto said in a booming voice. “Now.” He looked at Temari, “I’ll send word to Gaara.” He ran a hand through his hair.

Mako moved through the throng of ANBU. She grasped his hand and tugged it gently. “Come on, Obito. Let's go home.”

Obito looked back to Kakashi. He looked like Kakashi felt; like his world was crumbling.

Kakashi's fingers twitched, itching to reach out for him. For a moment, they stared at each other as the final pieces clicked in his brain. The boy nodded quickly. “Yeah, let’s go home.” His teammate slowly tugged him away. Tugged Obito away.

Sakura's-

Mine-

Sasuke chuckled, “You fuck the Hokage's daughter and you get a free pass for assaulting a Konoha citizen!?”

Obito didn't look away from Kakashi. He just kept nodding with more emphasis as Kakashi felt his world, again, fall apart.

III

Obito was shaking. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

They had been running for a day and a half. They were almost out of Fire. They had to get to Wind.

“That was unimaginably stupid, you know.”

Obito looked at Mako. “Which part?” Obito felt like he was going to be sick.

Meeting with Mina had been a bad idea. He knew it.

They were short on time, they needed to get back on the road. And

Kakashi was *always* her guard. *Always* !

And then, while running late to his team and seeing Kakashi.

Kakashi -

Obito stopped and *was* sick.

And then Sasuke.

He retched again.

Mako rubbed his back. “You shouldn't have provoked him-”

“He started it.” He hadn’t. “He opened his mouth,” Obito should have just walked away.

His eyes burned. *But I was so close. Kakashi was going to know-*

“You're a Haruno through and through. Losing your temper for no reason-”

“The last time I met him he was threatening my mother and he doesn't even know she's my fucking mother!”

“Well, he'll know if you keep screaming it!” Temari-sensei moved to grip him. “We need to keep moving.”

They were silent for a few clicks.

Obito slowed as the trees started to thin. “He knows.”

“Who?” Mako stopped and turned to face him.

“Kakashi knows.” Obito looked at the dirt of the forest floor before looking back up to Mako. He ripped his mask and hood off and started to run his hands over his face. “He knows. And his response was ‘no.’”

Mako shook her head, “That’s not what that meant,”

“He said no and and now my mother is going to realize how I have destroyed everything-”

“Obito-”

“Did you see him? He had been freaking out. I shouldn't have said anything. I shouldn't have said-” His breath was getting quicker and

quicker and every time he blinked he saw the realization, the dawning that this kid just laid the biggest news on him of his life.

And then left.

He felt Mako grab his shoulders and shake him slightly. “Did you *tell* him? Did you say ‘Kakashi, I’m your-”

Obito shook his head.

Mako shook him. “If you didn’t tell him, then he doesn't know.”

Obito looked into a tree. “But he said 'No.'”

Mako's hands came to his neck, resting firmly. “You heard him say 'no?'”

“Like he was in disbelief.”

Mako took a deep sigh before pulling away. “Don't think too much about it, okay? Let's get to Wind. Before we worry.”

III

The door slammed and Ino and Sakura jumped.

There was stomping until Obito covered in Sand stood in the doorway. The Kazekage was behind her.

“Go home, Ino.” Obito said firmly.

Sakura stood in front of her. “Obito-”

“All non-civilian Konoha personnel are to leave the village.” Gaara spoke calmly. He looked at Sakura. Typically he would be smiling. Like he had something up his sleeve. He looked ragged. “It's protocol until the incident has been resolved.”

“Incident?” Sakura's body filled with dread as she looked between her son and the Kazekage. ”What happened?”

“Obito, get cleaned up and at my office in less than one hour.” The Kazekage spoke with such authority that Sakura took a step back. Obito didn't speak, he stalked to his room, slamming the door.

“May-May we know what happened? Kazekage-san?” Ino whispered.

Gaara was watching Obito. “It seems that Uchiha Sasuke has decided to rear his ugly head.”

III

Sakura was numb as she sat with a shaky hand gripping a tea cup. It seemed that everything she had worked so hard for in the past eighteen years was crumbling underneath her.

Obito had been gone for three hours.

A dog whined in her lap.

The wind whipped around outside.

After another hour, the front door opened. She listened to the door close and the shoveling of feet. She watched the empty doorway until Obito appeared.

He looked tired as he slumped against the doorway. He took a heavy sigh, running a hand through his silver locks with the pink highlights. He slid to the floor, pulling his knees up high, pressing his back against the wall.

“I was on a mission in Fire.” He spoke slowly, not looking at her. “We were to recover a stolen scroll that was taken by some rogue Grass nin. We were to bring it back to Suna to be recoded and sent to Konoha.

“Which we did, successfully, but were...interrupted...”

Sakura felt the cup slip out of her hands. “By Sasuke.” Her heart ripped as his head nodded slowly.

“He confronted us and we stopped him the only way we could.

“We incapacitated him and poisoned him. He was unfit to return to Konoha on his own and we, as allies to the Leaf, escorted him back to the village. We were in the village less than 72 hours.”

Sakura's stomach clenched. “How many times have you been to Konoha?” Obito looked at the wall across from him. He didn't speak. “Obito.” She watched him pull himself in.

“It doesn't matter now.”

Tears streamed down her face. “Obito, I told you-”

“You didn't tell me he tortured you,” his voice cracked. His words froze the blood in her veins. Tears erupted from her eyes. “You told me he hurt you, he knocked you around, but you never said he psychologically tortured you.” His eyes were rimmed red as he took a shaky breath. “ *He* told me that.”

He pulled his knees closer, “He said he would do it again.”

They were silent for what seemed like hours.

“So we brought the scroll back to be recoded and were requested by the Hokage to return it.”

He leaned his head back, hitting his head on the wall, “It was part of the political bullshit between Gaara and Naruto.” He laughed bitterly. “So, Team Temari took the scroll back.” His finger pulled on his mask and he continued on. “We were meeting up to return home when I was stopped outside the Hokage tower.”

“By Sasuke?”

Then he paused. “No.” Sakura felt her stomach churn as she saw something painful was building behind his eyes. He searched for a lie. “He showed up minutes later. He wanted revenge for what happened in the woods.”

Sakura gasped, but Obito shrugged. “To protect myself, I trapped Sasuke in a coffin and was then put in a headlock by the Hokage.” He rested his head on his knees. “Gaara-jii says this is all a formality. That I won't forever be barred from Konoha.” He looked at her.

“And Sasuke?”

Obito shrugged. “I don't know, Mom.” He crossed his arms. “If I see him again, I will kill him.”

III

Kakashi's heart was beating his his ears, his whole body was shaking as Naruto repeated himself. “Sasuke has been missing for three hours.”

Sasuke had been in the hospital for five days for his injuries inflicted by the sand ninja. Three broken ribs caused his lungs to puncture. Shortly after surgery he was declared missing.

“So when are we leaving for Suna?” Shikamaru said with a bit of

anticipation. “I mean, it doesn't take a genius to know that's where he's going.”

Naruto sat at his desk, his elbows on the desk and his fingers laced,staring between Shikamaru and Sai. He spoke softly. “We leave immediately.”

Uchiha VS Hatakes

The sun slowly rose above the desert horizon. The great village hidden in the sand sat in the middle of the vast sea of sand. Large walls that looked like dunes from a distance surrounded the village. Protecting the village from weather and enemies alike. Towards the peak of the western wall two figures stood at its peaks. They stood straight, arms crossed, staring out at the horizon, waiting for the mirage of the desert to reveal its truth.

They wore similar outfits. One a crisp red overcoat that billowed in the morning breeze. He wore a purple-gray chest plate. Strapped to his back was the gourd infamous of the Kazekage.

The second figure's red coat was an almost dull brown. It was shorter; frayed from years of hard battles. The chest plate scratched, nicked, and cracked. It had seen more than its share of conflict. He didn't wear a large gourd, but a smaller one on his hip. The desert was his gourd.

It left his back bare, the circle insignia on his back reflective of the sun as it rose above the desert horizon.

The first figure looked up to the second. His face was covered by a mask the color of sand, but his bright green eyes spoke more than he ever could. The first looked back to the horizon.

"Do not let him near my village."

The second figure lowered a pair of goggles; they brought out the contrast details of the sand. He didn't speak. The second figure was simply…gone.

III

Obito's breath evened as he watched from atop one of the highest dunes. Uchiha Sasuke grew against the horizon. Obito's heart slowed as his fingers flexed. Sand shifted around him, moving to his will as he started making out distinct features of Uchiha;

His dark pants with a white shirt. His short dark hair. His eyes swirling reds. Obito focused on his neck. His jawline before moving to his feet. The Uchiha stopped.

The sand shifted almost nervously before dying down around them. Obito had his hands in his pants, slightly slouched. He looked relaxed, but every muscle in his body was on alert.

“So you’ve come to meet me?” Uchiha said slowly. Almost arrogantly. “You think you can cross me and get away with it, Sunan.” Obito’s eyes flickered up quickly to see the grin plastered on Sasuke’s face. “You dare cross an Uchiha? I suppose you really want to d-” Sasuke was cut off as a tidal wave of sand crashed over him.

Obito watched as Uchiha quickly evaded, launching into the air twirling and making hand signals. Obito braced himself as a large fireball erupted. Obito released a large wall of sand before collecting sand around him, running hard to the left, trying to keep as much distance between him and Uchiha. There was a sizzling sound and the sound of glass bursting. Obito looked behind him to see a line of molten sand and glass where he had been seconds before. Obito gritted his teeth. He’d have to get closer.

Obito beckoned sand forward, building an L-Shaped wall, running up and above it. He crouched above the wall, chakra feet clinging to the sand in the air. He watched and calculated as Uchiha threw another fireball, blasting a hole in the wall. Obito jumped down, grabbing a kunai out of his pocket, gathering chakra in his fist and aiming for Uchiha’s seye. Obito heard a crunch as Sasuke was shot off the ground into the wall, inches from the molten sand.

Uchiha was unfazed. He pulled out a sword. Obito rushed forward, ducking, sticking his leg out in a sweeping kick.

He dropped to the ground and rolled as Uchiha jumped to avoid, lifting his sword and slicing the air. Obito pressed his hands down on the ground, launching his body up, his feet aimed at Uchiha’s chest. It hit his mark, but only proved to knock him backwards.

Sasuke fell on his back, arms out, rolling back into standing position.

He let out a chuckle, but before he could speak, Obito launched himself again, doubling the armor on his fist and his chakra.

He screamed. “Sha!”

Sasuke stepped to the side, bringing his sword down. Obito felt the sword sliced through his armor. He felt something warm slide down his shoulder. He stumbled and fell, turning in the sand, holding his arms up and tight together, blocking as another swipe as the sword

came down. Obito's body resonated as his sand armor flaked. He looked up at the Uchiha's face before quickly looking down at his chest. His smile, his red swirling eyes made Obito's stomach churn. The blade pushed further and further into Obito. He laced his arms with chakra, but he felt the blade slowly sink into his skin.

Suddenly, Obito felt Sasuke jerk, loosening the pressure. Obito used all his strength to push up and away from the blade, rolling over. Soon he was on his feet, twisting his body, lifting his leg into a devastating round kick to the Uchiha's chest. It hit hard in the solar plexus. Uchiha doubled over, clutching his stomach. In the glint of the sun, Obito saw what had caused him to hesitate. A long thin senbon stuck out of his neck. Obito twisted around to see Hachiko and Mako rushing towards him.

"Stay back!" He shouted.

"Yeah, yeah…" Mako said as she rushed past him, shoving him towards Hachiko. "Let's keep the narcissism to a minimum while your arms are bleeding." He looked over to Hachiko, who was gripping his arms tightly, healing. He stared down at his arms. He didn't feel them. Panic started to rise.

"Poison." Hachiko bit her lip.

"The blade is poisoned!" Obito turned back towards his teammate, who missed a double side kick to Uchiha's mid section. While her leg was still extended Uchiha ran the blade of his sword across her calf. Obito rushed towards her. She inhaled deeply, pulling her leg back and spinning, pulling two shuriken out and launching them at the Uchiha. She put her foot down and instantly crumpled to the ground. Uchiha blocked the throwing stars and with a few quick hand signals snakes darted out at the young girl. Obito threw up a sand wall. The snakes crashed into the wall, wiggling frantically before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Obito watched Hachiko rush over to Mako. "I was able to get some of the poison out." Hachiko said, kneeling next to Mako. Her eyes flickered to Obito. "Be advised."

"I don't want your little girlfriends interrupting our fight." Uchiha laughed. "Though they aren't what you have your eye on, is it?"

Obito watched Uchiha's arms as he moved, watching his hips as he shifted into a more aggressive stance. Without warning, Uchiha struck.

Snakes started appearing around Obito. He knocked and flailed and threw up tight sand walls to cover himself. He quickly summoned sand, letting it envelop him in a ball.

Silence.

He heard Uchiha's muffled laugh. "Isn't this familiar!" Obito shifted to the back of his ball as the sword pierced his defense. The sand wasn't as strong as before. He quickly put his hands to his forearms, summoning all his healing ability to draw the poison out. He cursed himself as he heard the sword enter his tomb again, knocking against his sand armor.

He was running out of chakra. He was going to need to think quickly. He was going to have to take Uchiha out fast. As he pulled the poison out, throwing it to the side, he cursed Mako. Why did she have to be so brash and run in like that? She could have held back and waited for a battle plan. Then Hachiko wouldn't be held up with Mako.

Though if it wasn't for Hachiko warning him about the poison, he'd probably already be an Uchiha shishkabob.

He was only going to get one good shot. The element of surprise was his.

Obito took a deep breath. This was it. He threw the last of his poison out of his arms and took one last deep breath.

He dropped his tomb.

He launched himself in the air, calling for all of his chakra into his fist. He'd knock his lights out. It was dirty, it was messy, but it'd get the job done. He aimed for the bridge of his nose. Without his chakra enhanced strength, he'd be able to break that bastards nose. But with-

His aim was true. He couldn't help but smirk a bit as he saw the pale, almost porcelain like face, one ugly red eye swollen shut from his original punch.

"Sha-ra-no!" His fist made contact with Uchiha's head. It felt like a sonic boom. But the Uchiha didn't move.

He split into a grin. "Well, haven't I heard that one before?" Uchiha Sasuke took a step back. Obito's heart raced as he stayed levitating in the air. Still sprawled, his right arm sticking out in front of him, his feet slightly behind him in a forward motion.

Sasuke Uchiha laughed maniacally. He lazily sheathed his sword. He looked over to Obito. His red eyes swirling slowly.

“Where’d you learn that little catch phrase?”

It felt like bile rising in his throat. He bit his lip. Syllables rolled off his tongue. They were illegible. Uchiha narrowed his eyes.

“I will ask you again.”

Obito swallowed thickly, shaking his head. Sasuke Uchiha rolled his eyes. With a few short hand moves snakes shot towards Obito. Pain erupted in his stomach. He looked down and watched, horrified as a snake burrowed deeply into his stomach.

“I will ask again, but remember; I already know the answer.”

Between the pain in his stomach and the tightness in his throat, tears rolled down his cheek. “M-My Mother.”

Uchiha fully turned. Three quick strides and he was nose to nose with the Uchiha. He grabbed him roughly by the chin. Sasuke’s brow furrowed. “Fucking bitch…” He shoved Obito’s face away. He turned and took a few steps away before turning back.

“She betrayed me.” He pressed his lips together. “She promised herself to me and then she made a mistake.” His lips curl. “You, apparently.” He sighed. “And with who?” Obito shuddered. Uchiha studied him, his lip curling. “No wonder she ran away.”

“Fuck you.” Pain shot through his neck as he spoke. Sasuke looked at him impassively. “You have a family. You have what you wanted-”

“I wanted her.” He snapped. “She is strong, beautiful, and smart.”

“Smart enough to get away from you.” Sasuke’s face twitched. In a flash his sword was unsheathed and Obito felt fire in his side. He gritted his teeth. The fire slowly spread.

“She apparently didn’t teach you the same.”

Uchiha took a step back and watched. Obito bit his lip, trying to focus on anything other than the pain slowly licking him inside and out. He tried to move, tried to move anything but his face, but he just. couldn’t.

“Once I kill you, I will kill her.” Sasuke’s words held no emotion. It

was like he was telling him the weather. “I would wait for her to see, but I don’t want to give her that kind of satisfaction.” Uchiha slowly placed his hands together, crouching down. Slowly, the sound of birds filled Obito’s ears. “A fitting death, don’t you agree.” Obito’s eyes widened as Uchiha seemed to start glowing blue. He swallowed thickly.

The sound grew louder and louder. Sasuke let out an animal-like cry as he lunged forward. Obito closed his eyes. He could only think of his mother and the tears she would shed for him.

I’m so sorry…

And then then...nothing.

III

The screams of birds slowly ebbed away. Sand swirled on the ground uneasily. Obito’s eyes snapped open wide. So wide and emerald before they rolled to the back of head and he collapsed in a heap on the desert floor. His mangled body unmoving but the small, so small rise and fall of his chest.

And for that, Kakashi could have cried.

Kakashi wrenched his arm out of the center of Sasuke’s chest, clenching his fingers as the tingling that was always left over from the Chidori raced up and down his arm. Sasuke was still on his feet, but struggling. His breathing was ragged and wet. Kakashi was half aware. His eyes couldn’t leave Obito’s.

Obito.

He watched as Obito’s teammates rushed to his side, one more sluggish than the other. Kakashi watched as they carefully turned him over. They ripped off his mask and his face was ashy. Carefully one started to inspect his body while the other inspected his head.

“We need to get him back to the village.” One said with authority. “He was in that genjustu for way too long. Plus…” She trailed off, her fingers moving to where Kakashi had seen the bastard ram his sword into him.

“Who knows how much poison is on the whole sword.” The other whispered. “Or how potent it is.” She looked up. She looked at Kakashi for a moment before her eyes went behind him. “They with

you?"

Kakashi watched Obito's chest slowly rise and fall. He tensed as the boy's body started shivering. "I'll start working on him. We've got to get back or he won't-"

"Eragh!" Kakashi looked down to see Sasuke swing his sword high. Kakashi took a step back and kicked hard. Anger started to build in his chest. He shot another front kick out hitting Sasuke in the chin. As his body rose, Kakashi rammed his fist into his face.

Obito.

He was too late. He was too late, again, to save Obito. He couldn't save Obito, Rin, Sensei, or Sakura.

Sakura…

He punched Sasuke with everything he had.

Sasuke fell back. Kakashi stood over him, his body humming, tears threatening. He looked over to where Obito, *his son* -

He turned back to Sasuke. He moved forward, throwing a kick at Sasuke again, but he rolled away.

Sasuke slowly got to his feet. He wiped blood from his mouth. "How unfortunate." Sasuke eyed his boy.

"You just figured it out?" Sasuke started laughing. "Cute." Sasuke straightened, "You can die together." In a blink of an eye, Sasuke was in front of him. Kakashi threw his arms up in a block, bringing his leg up and out in a sweep kick. Sasuke stepped back, pulled out a kunai and threw it fast. Kakashi side stepped, his hands moving fast in a ground technique. Before he could finish, Sasuke threw a giant fireball. Kakashi jumped to the left before dashing forward. Kakashi's teeth clenched as he threw more hand signs together. A giant water dragon sprung forward, knocking Sasuke back. Kakashi threw two kunai, both exploding sand up and around the Uchiha. Kakashi rushed. Sasuke appeared from the sand, kunai in hand. Kakashi blocks and palm strikes Sasuke's ribs. Sasuke kicks high, Kakashi dodges and Sasuke drops to sweep kick. Kakashi jumps backward.

"Sasuke!" Kakashi looks over to see Naruto and the others have finally caught up. "Stop Sasuke!" Naruto screams.

Birds begin chirping. Kakashi watches and waits for the charge. But it doesn't come. Instead, the chidori explodes from Sasuke's hand and lunges at Kakashi. Kakashi barely has time to leap out of the way; the chidori hits him in the side and Kakashi curses his distraction.

His stomach drops as he sees Sasuke not going not for him, but for Obito.

Time slows as he races towards the three Suna ninjas. One of the women is on her feet, body in front of Obito as the Chidori begins chirping once again. Kakashi's mind whirls. He decides that tackling Sasuke would be the best option.

He could kill him while he had him pinned.

Suddenly Sasuke stops. Turning in almost slow motion, Sasuke pivots on the balls of his feet, turning to face Kakashi. Kakashi watches as he moves forward; he can't move out of the way in time.

As Sasuke's chidori ruptured his sternum, breaking ribs and ripping organs, Kakashi could only apologize.

I'm sorry Sakura. I couldn't stop- Kakashi let out a gurgle, looking down at Sasuke's smiling face.

"Truly fitting."

Kakashi nodded, pulling out his last kunai and grabbed Sasuke's arm and pulled him closer, bringing the kunai to Sasuke's shoulder. He pierced the shoulder, sliding it down his arm. Sasuke screams as he shoves Kakashi away. Kakashi collapsed as he watched Sasuke look down at his now lifeless arm.

I'm sorry, Obito.

Kakashi watched as anger filled Sasuke's face. Sasuke pulled out a short sword and headed towards him. "I'll kill you, then the boy." He grinned. "And then Sakura." Kakashi watched, almost out of body, as Sasuke stopped in front of him. He went to bend down next to Kakashi but a rumbling on the ground made him pause.

Sand erupted around Kakashi and he watched in amazement as in a blink of an eye, Sasuke disappeared in a wall of sand.

As the sand falls to the ground, his vision becomes blurry as blood seeps out of his body. His legs give out. He swallows thickly as he

hears muffled thumps. As Kakashi tries to move he hears a voice that almost makes his heart stop.

“Kakashi, hang in there.”

“Sak-”

“I need a medic transport over here!”

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto sounded near, yet so far.

He raised a heavy hand and it was grasped in a small calloused hand. “Ob, Obi-”

“Stay with me Kakashi.” Her voice was no nonsense. Like when they were on the mission to Rain all those years ago. “You have to stay with me...with us.”

“Us…” Kakashi slipped out as darkness took him.

The End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi's eyes open, but it takes a few seconds for his brain to register light. The white light made him flinch. He groaned softly. Slowly, shapes started taking form, but the white didn't dim. It took a few more minutes to realize that everything was white.

He was in the hospital.

A beeping sound became louder as he tried to pull himself up, shifting around, ignoring the pain.

"Would you stop that?" His brain stopped. "That noise is loud." Kakashi turns his head to see himself. He was sitting on the bed next to him, reading. Not bothering to look up at him. His hair was shorter than he remembered ever having it, his frame, a bit fuller, stronger than his had been before he hit his late twenties. And he didn't have nearly as many scars. Kakashi sat up, grimacing. But his younger self was sitting reading Icha Icha. It was the easiest way to keep the nurses from bothering him. His younger self was bandaged tightly. His upper body and chest were covered in thick bandages. His arms and neck were lightly bandaged.

His younger self looked over to him. "You feeling okay?" Kakashi almost fell off the other side of his bed. His eyes were green.

It wasn't him. It was-

Memories started roaring back.

"Obi-Obito!" Kakashi started moving, the beeping becoming frantic. "Are you alright, are you-"

The boy was wincing. "Please calm down-the beeping."

Kakashi looked around. He was attached to various machines. His mind absorbed everything before he turned back to Obito. The book-the book he gave them, was forgotten as the boy lightly gripped his head.

Kakashi painfully grappled the machines before unplugging them. The

boy immediately sighed. After a moment, he grinned cheekily over to Kakashi, green eyes shining. “Thanks, but I don’t think the head doctor will be too happy with that.”

Kakashi stared dumbly at the boy, leaning a lot of his weight on his arms. “You...you look so much like me.” Obito’s grin faltered.

“I think...I think that’s genetics...eh, Kakashi-sir.”

Kakashi’s arm gave out, making him collapse on the bed. He inhaled deeply as pain blinded him.

“Just-just lay there. You’ll hurt yourself more.” Kakashi adjusted himself slowly before the pain started ebbing away.

After a few more minutes of silence, Kakashi spoke weakly. “I never liked ‘sir.’” He turned his head, smiling. “And I really don’t want to hear that from you.” The boy flushed. “Regardless of genetics.” He added with a sigh. Kakashi turned back to face the white walls in front of him. He closed his eyes. He thought he might have drifted off to sleep when he heard the book close with a small snap. A few steady heartbeats later the boy laughed. “This is not how I imagined it would go.” Kakashi looked over to the boy, who was wincing slightly, holding his pierced side. “Not entirely sure how it would go but in a hospital room was not how I imagined it.”

Kakashi exhaled slowly, sifting in the bed so he was sitting straight up. It hurt like hell, but he managed to drag his legs to the side of the bed. He supposed now was as good of a time as any to talk to the kid.

Kakashi propped his elbows on his knees and rubbed his face. “I’ll be honest with you, I never imagined it myself.” He shrugged, not looking at Obito. “Though the amount of time I’ve spent in the hospital it only makes sense.” He peaked his ‘good eye’ at Obito. “Thought you’d be younger.” He gave him a small eye crinkle. The boy opened his mouth to speak, but Kakashi cut him off. “Never imagined myself as a- a father. Literally...or even genetically.” The boy’s face was unreadable. “But...there are worse things in life, I suppose.

“I didn’t really have a dad growing up myself. He...passed away when I was young.”

“Killed himself.” Kakashi jolted, his vision going white with the pain. “Oh god! I’m sorry!” The boy’s panicked cries made the pain a little more bearable.

“It’s fine…just blunt.” Kakashi patted his front before collapsing on the bed sideways.

“Genetics?” Obito said after a while.

Kakashi let out a small grunt. “Yeah, I guess so.” He stared up at the white ceiling before closing his eyes. “I more or less grew up alone. I did have Sensei for a little while, but at least you’ve got Mr. Tall and Smiley.” Kakashi looked up, smiling. He would say the pain in his chest was the Chidori.

Obito stared at him blankly. “Gaara-jii?” The boy blinked, almost like he was pushed over. “Tanade-sensei?” Kakashi opened his mouth but the boy was quick. “The-the last time you were here! You saw her with Tanade-sensei! Yeah! No, no, no!” He shook his head, wincing. “He’s head of some hospital thing! He is one of her pupils! I asked!” They were silent for a moment. For a man who relished in silence, Kakashi felt it was too long. “She’s-she’s never, eh…had anyone around.” Obito’s eyes were shining as he spoke. “It’s just been the two of us. Tsunade-baa-chan would come sometimes. Or Ino.” He shrugged. “Only other man who’s ever been in our house is Gaara-jii.” He frowned in a way that made Kakashi uncomfortable. “You okay?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Kakashi flopped back down on the bed. “That’s the question.”

“…If it’s any consolation…” The boy started tentatively. “I just…I just wanted you to know, you know?” Kakashi sat up. The boy was looking down at his hands, looking suddenly very, very small. “I didn’t want anything from you. No-I didn’t want you to do anything with the information. I just-just wanted you to know.” He looked up at the ceiling. “And Mom-” He smiled sadly, “She was just scared.” He shook his head and looked back at Kakashi. “Guess I can kind of see why though now, eh? Hindsight and all.” He patted where he’d been stabbed.

Kakashi frowned. Obito looked away. “I knew I shouldn’t have antagonized him-”

“You didn’t really-”

“I know what he did to her.” Obito said softly. He looked away. His hands dropped to his blankets. “It’s like what he did to me. But a lot worse.” He gripped his blankets tightly. “I got angry and instead of just brushing him off, I antagonized him. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to kill him because even after all these years, she’s still

hurting.

“She’s still afraid.”

The silence between them was heavy. Kakashi sighed. “Well, she sure as hell wasn’t afraid out there.” Kakashi’s mind went to the blur of pink he saw before he passed out. His mouth twitched. “She was not scared.”

The silence this time was almost comfortable. “What are you going to do?”

Kakashi’s mind wiped clean. “I don’t know what to tell you, kid.”

“You mad?”

Kakashi’s stomach curled. “That’s certainly one way of putting it.” Loathful, spiteful, upset, hurt, betrayed?

Kakashi sat up in the bed, putting his elbows on his knees. He looked at Obito. Obito of the Sand. Obito Haruno. Obito Hatake?

“Whatever I feel about Sakura,” He said seriously, “It has nothing to do with you.”

“We have to build our own connections and bonds. Just the two of us.

“If that’s what you want.” He wished he had his mask. Obito’s eyes brimmed with tears, but Kakashi understood. Hell, he felt tears welling up in his own eyes.

“Why don’t-” Kakashi pushed his feelings down. Far, far down, where he normally kept them. “Since we’re trapped here, we might as well make the best of it.” *I’ve always been better about dealing with the past poorly rather than the present.* “I’m sure she’s told you some stuff about me,” *or you’ve heard something at least,* “Why don’t you tell me about yourself?”

When Obito didn’t answer right away Kakashi frowned. *Perhaps he was expecting more?* He ignored the lump forming in his stomach, threatening to push his emotions up again. “I’m not one to talk about myself…”

“We don’t need to.” Obito whispered, The boy’s voice was soft and meek. It made him shudder. He used to use that voice with Sensei. The boy sighed. “I know all about you.

“I’ve always been a bit of a fan.”

Obito must have sensed it because he went on. “The stories of Kakashi the Copy Nin, were always my favorite bedtime stories.” He flushed. “Whether at home, or here.” Obito bit his lip. “I’m sure I’ve heard them all,” his eyes were shining bright, “I’m sure I’ve heard them all a hundred times.” He recalled the first conversation he had with the closest thing he really had to a father figure, his sensei. How excited he was to finally meet him. His hero. Kakashi shook his head, brushing his thumb against his cheek. “Then tell me all about you, Obito.” He could hear his sensei’s voice in his head.

He was sure that the face Obito gave him was the same face he’d been given all those years ago.

And Obito started.

III

Obito was sleeping soundly. Before he had drifted off to sleep, he’d tossed Kakashi his old friend, his trusty orange book.

Oh what full circles we’ve come .

He looked up from his book to the slumbering Obito.

Kakashi smirked. *You’re a good kid.*

He closed his eyes.

He didn’t realize that he fell asleep until he felt another presence in the room.

Someone was watching him.

Kakashi slowly opened his eyes. As he blinked the blurriness away. He thought he had to be dreaming.

“Sakura.” Her hair was pulled back in a long ponytail, much like Tsunade’s. Her green eyes shined as tears slowly started rolling down her cheek.

“Hey there…Kakashi…” Her smile was contagious.

“I had the wildest dream.” He murmured. Swallowing thickly. He noticed that her hand was gripping his tightly. “You appeared in a whirlwind and K.O.ed Sasuke.”

Her face dropped slightly before she started chuckling softly. “I couldn’t have him killing my…” she paused, looking back.

He squeezed her hand as her face came back to his. “You’ve got a good kid.” He watched as she looked over to the other bed, smiling softly.

“A bit stupid and reckless, but he’s a good kid.” Her smile drooped. He gave her hand another squeeze. “But that might just be genetics.”

She pressed her lips together. “I’m sorry.” She said softly. She opened her mouth and paused, looking over to him. “I’m sorry.” Tears were streaming down her face. “Not too much more I can say.”

He shrugged, looking over at the sleeping boy. “No, I guess not.”

They were silent, watching their *son* . Kakashi frowned.

“I thought...I guess it doesn’t matter what I thought.”

“No.” He said flatly. “But you can tell me if you want.”

“I was afraid for you. If I told you, Sasuke would kill you.”

“Thanks.” He wasn’t sure how he meant it. Sasuke’s rage wasn’t something to mess with, especially when it came to ruining his little ‘plan.’ But that was a long time ago. And Kakashi wasn’t young then, but he could have certainly held his own. Now…

“His family is here.”

Kakashi turned to stare at her. “How long have I been here?”

She shrugged, not looking at him. “Six days.”

He let out a low whistle. “Is Sasuke-”

“Stabilized.” She let go of his hand and stood, moving to the bed next to him. “You have no idea how much I really hoped I had knocked his lights out, for good.” She leaned over her son and gently brushed a few rogue strands of hair out of his eyes.

Kakashi looked away. “I-uh-appreciate you telling him about me.” He looked up to her before looking away.

She wasn’t looking at him anyways. “You’re his father. He deserves to know about you.”

Hearing Sakura say ‘father’ shook Kakashi to the core. Like the final nail to seal his fate. He let out a nervous chuckle. Father. It felt weird, being directed towards him. Father. It was foreign, but maybe he could get used to it.

Maybe.

“I should have killed him.”

Kakashi let out a small hum.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Obito shifted in his sleep.

“This isn’t how I thought this would go,” Sakura sighed, turning her head to look at him. She was frowning. “I couldn’t tell you what it would be like, seeing you again, but I didn’t think this would be how it happened. How would you find out about Obito.”

Kakashi shifted in his seat. “Me waking up with a hole in my chest and seeing you sitting over me seems like a pretty plausible way to cross paths again.” He smiled at her. “But him...well…” Kakashi smiled at the memory, “I met him the same way, in a sense.” It wasn’t one hole in the chest, but several stab wounds.

Sakura nodded, “I always wanted to tell you in person.” She looked over, “In my mind he was always much smaller.”

Kakashi looked over at the sleeping Obito. “He was.” Kakashi still couldn’t believe how *big* Obito had grown. He exhaled, wincing at the pain in his chest. He wasn’t sure what it was from. “But I didn’t *know* . Not until a few days ago.”

“Wait, what?” He didn’t look away from Obito. “ *Days?* ” Sakura’s voice was pained.

It eased Kakashi’s ache.

“I was walking with Pakkun after covering for him being ‘youthful’ with Naruto’s daughter in the woods.”

“Excuse me?” Sakura seemed to forget she was supposed to be upset. Kakashi couldn’t help at smirk at how much like a mother she sounded.

“I saw him coming. I stopped him. I was going to…” Even now Kakashi wasn’t sure what his plan had been, “But I just looked at him.

“And then he wanted to tell me something. Something important.” Kakashi would agree with this, “And he was *trying* to tell me, but then Sasuke showed up. But by then,” he sighed, leaning back in the bed. “I saw it. Clear as day.” His father’s kind smile on Obito’s face. “Though I should have realized it a lot sooner.” *So much for me being a genius.*

He looked up at an astonished Sakura. He knew the pain in his chest had nothing to do with his wound.

“It’s why I came.” Kakashi said simply, “I wouldn’t have taken a hole in the chest for just anyone.” He put his hand to his chin thoughtfully, “though perhaps, for Obito of the Sand, I would have. He was always such a good kid. Besides the heavy petty with Mina-chan.”

He looked back at Obito. He had a feeling it would be a long time before the smile didn’t hurt as he looked at him. “Which might be better than what he hoped for when I stopped him in the street.” *I need to tell him that when he wakes up.*

That even if I didn’t know *, I’d still be here for him. In Suna.*

Clarity made all the non-physical pain ebb away. For now.

He looked back up at Sakura.

She was shaking her head. “When did you first meet?”

“I met Obito in the middle of the woods with…several holes in my chest.

“He saved my life.” He eyed Sakura. “We did that. Saved each other’s life. It was our father-son bonding.” Six different emotions ran across Sakura’s face before she settled with despair.

“Kakashi, I’m-”

“I don’t want to hear it.” He said calmly, watching Obito sleep. “And you should be. And I am really, *really* , angry at you.” He couldn’t help the bubbling laughter. “I’ve been looking for you for almost twenty years and you’ve been in Suna this whole time. People knew.

“I didn’t.” He gestured to Obito, “Obito always seemed a bit flustered for one reason or another when our paths would cross. Now I know why.”

Obito’s emotional outburst in the streets of Konoha weren’t just about

Sasuke.

Kakashi felt sick to his stomach. “His fear was rejection. My rejection,” His gaze was steel, “ *Yours* when you found out he told me.

“But you?

“But you couldn’t trust me with this?” He gestured to Obito.

“Kakashi-”

Kakashi never did well with crying women, but he was doing surprisingly well with her. “I don’t know what I would have done,

“But it wouldn’t have been this.” He scoffed. “He deserved better.”

“But Sasuke had found out, he wouldn’t just try to kill you. He’d try to kill me. To kill our baby, my baby, Kakashi. If you went after him, he’d know of Obito’s existence. That avenging anger would drive him to the ends of the earth-like before.” She sat straight. “And you have a habit of being reckless when it comes to saving others.”

Kakashi looked from her to Obito.

“So I have to live with everything. All of his questions, his looks, his loneliness. The guilt of holding this all from you. Of living with the ‘what could have beens’, while you got to live obliviously. But live. To…to meet Obito anyways.” She sighed heavily. “I can’t believe you two knew each other.”

They sat in silence except for the soft beeping of the machines. “You are Obito’s mother,” It was weird referring to Sakura as anyone’s mother, but it was getting easier. Easier than thinking of *him* as a father. “You were trying to protect him.” He saw her nod out of his periphery. “And you were doing what you thought was best.

“But nothing you did protected him.”

“Sasuke-”

“He’s pretty well known for his little scuffle with Sasuke a few years ago.” Sakura started. “It’s where this all started. It has nothing to do with you.” Realization dawned on Kakashi, “You really think this was all about you?” Her eyes were wide. He snorted, “Ah, Sakura-chan, I thought you grew out of that narcissistic phase.” Kakashi watched all the color in Sakura’s face drained. He nodded. “ *This* was about Obito

and Sasuke.

“When Sasuke called him out in the village, it wasn’t because he was anyone’s son. But the kid from Suna.

“He almost did tell Sasuke you were here, in a fit of emotional rage.” Kakashi looked back at Obito. “It’s why he was barred from the village.

“To protect *you* .

“None of this would have happened if you let me make my own decisions.”

Kakashi sat watching Obito while Sakura silently wept next to him.

Kakashi wondered what Obito looked like with silver hair; it was his natural hair color right? Or maybe it was white. Something squeezed in his chest. “I don’t even know what color his hair is.” *I really don’t know anything about him.*

Obito.

My-my son.

“It’s silver. Like yours.” Sakura wiped her face. “He’s so much like you.” Kakashi watched as Sakura looked over to Obito, her face morphing as she smiled at him.

A mother’s smile. “He’s wonderful. I’ve always told him you’d be so proud of him.”

“I am. I always have been.” Sakura’s hands curled in her lap. “That’s not going to change.”

“This isn’t how I wanted things to go,” Anger washed over her face, “I want to make this up to you in anyway that I can.

“I love you Kakashi. I always have. And I don’t know what is going to happen now, but I hope one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Kakashi watched Sakura seriously. “I love you too, Sakura.” He said almost bitterly. Her eyes snapped to his, as bright as Obito’s were in the streets of Konoha.

He swallowed thickly, “The only thing I am concerned with now is

him." He nodded to Obito. "What we are, what we aren't, isn't important." He looked back at Obito, "What happens to us, we'll deal with that when we get to that bridge.

"But right now I want to really get to know Obito.

"My son."

The Shinobi of the Sand.

III

Obito readjusted the grip on the cane. His burns on his right leg itched even though the feel of sand grains on it caused excruciating pain. Mako stood to his left, and Hachiko to his right. He looked around the hospital room/makeshift courtroom.

Uchiha's hospital room.

The Kazekage stood at the foot of the bed, arms crossed, looking simply menacing. He made Obito want to squirm where he stood. Standing next to him was the Hokage, looking slightly less menacing, but equally as intimidating. Various high up members from either village scattered the room. Sasuke's family sat at the bedside obediently. His wife's head bowed while the daughter scowled at anyone that looked their way.

Kakashi stood on the other side of the room, slouching heavily against the wall. Obito hadn't seen him in a few days. Despite their room being on lock down, Kakashi had disappeared three days before. From the look of him, he didn't seem to be in much shape to be anywhere but bed. But his mom has told him that that would happen.

When he disappears, don't take it personal.

He needs some time to process it all.

Kakashi was wearing his typical jounin attire, his face securely hidden. He had Icha Icha open in his hand. He looked terribly bored, but Obito kept feeling his gaze on him every few minutes or so.

"Uchiha Sasuke," Gaara of the Sand's voice boomed in the small room. "Are you comfortable?"

Sasuke, who was tucked into the bed tightly, his dressing gown matching the bed sheets and the strip covering his eyes, shrugged.

“You will be banished from my village once you are able to walk out of it.” He looked over to the Hokage. “But I’d much rather see you dragged. For preying on my village.”

“Not your whole-”

“One citizen or them all, it makes no difference.” Gaara spoke firmly. “I will give you the benefit of the doubt, sometimes my shinobi do not act in the best interest of my village.” Obito looked down at his feet. Hachiko put a small hand on his, patting it gently. “You will be banished, never to step food in the Wind country again. If I find you twenty miles from my village, I will personally kill you.” Gaara looked at the Hokage. “This has been agreed.”

“Yeah…” Naruto scratched the back of his head.

“And the boy?” Uchiha spoke. “Will he be barred from Konoha?”

“Yes.” Gaara spoke.

Kakashi flinched.

Uchiha smirked.

“The duration of his ban is based on the will of the Hokage. It is not my village. But he will not be leaving Suna for the foreseeable future. He attacked a civilian of another village *in* that village, whether he was provoked or not.

“He will be dealt with according to my rule.” Obito sighed. He knew he was getting off easy, whatever his punishment was. He looked up and his eyes met Kakashi lone eye. “Any conflicts you have with your peers is none of the business of Suna. Nor do we care.

“But any issues you have with current Konoha civilians will not be dealt with in my village.”

Gaara looked at Naruto. “Is this agreed upon?”

Naruto froze before finally conceding. “Of course,” Naruto looked up to Obito and gave him a cheeky thumbs up once Gaara turned back to the Uchiha.

It was then when his mother slipped into the room. Obito watched as the Uchiha shifted in his bed, his eyes flashing red. His wife stiffened and looked down to the daughter on her lap.

Kakashi flipped a page in his book.

She walked up to the Kazekage and handed him a clipboard, whispering into his ear. She took a step back, moving behind the Kazekage.

Gaara shifted in front of his mother. “Still slight internal bleeding. His leg needs to settle more before he can travel.”

“How long?” Naruto asked.

His mother’s voice was low, “I would say he could travel in two or three days, but my medical opinion is that he needs at least six to ten days before being able to travel safely.”

“Thank you.” Gaara whispered.

His mother turned on her heel and perked up the instant that she saw him. “What are you doing? Get back to bed!” The fire in his eyes made him pressed himself against the wall.

“I requested that he be here,” Gaara said, tilting his head back but not looking away from Uchiha. “We were discussing-”

“He is my patient in my hospital and he will do as I command.” She cut the Kazekage off. As she took a few steps towards him, his teammates took a few steps away.

He looked over to Kakashi, who was turning a page, but his eyes were cautiously looking at him.

He looked back to his mother, who stood over him with her arms crossed. “Now.”

He bowed, shifted awkwardly due to his crutch and started to hobble away.

Naruto started cackling. His mother didn’t bat an eye. “I have more beds, Naruto.”

She grabbed Obito’s shoulder roughly and trudged him out. Once they were out in the hallway, her grip loosened. “We have a lot to talk about.”

He grimaced. “You’re telling me.”

She sighed, her grip slipping. “I don’t need your manly pride-tough

attitude."

He spun on his heel, almost falling. She looked steeled, ready. She didn't expect him to drop his cane and wrap his arms around her.

He put a lot of his weight on her, but she held it, supporting him as he squeezed her tightly.

"I love you, Mom." He whispered into her hair.

"I'm sorry, Obito."

"I know. We'll figure it out.

"On the bright side; I'm not dead. Kakashi's not dead. Eh, Sasuke's not-"

"Excuse me?" Obito felt his mother's arms tighten as he started. She righted him and turned, standing in front of him as he looked up to see who it was.

It was Sasuke's wife.

Obito put his hands on his mother's shoulders.

"Mine name is Uchiha Ibiko." She bowed deeply. She was very slight, almost ill looking. Her eyes were almost as dark as night, but her smile was warm, despite the circumstances. "Thank you for saving my husband's life those years ago." Obito took a step back as his mother stared at the crown of the woman's head. "It means so much to my family."

She rose, her back a bit straighter. "And I know of your history with him," She said, looking into his mother's eyes. His mom went to take a step forward, but Obito held her still. "Less than I would like, I'll admit, but I do understand, and I know that a simple thanks will not be enough to express my gratitude." She looked back. "He has...a lot of hate, and anger…" She nodded to herself and turned back to the head doctor. "But he also has kindness."

Obito snorted.

"Obito!" His mother barked. He took a step back.

"I know he does." She said softly to Ibiko. She ignored the grip Obito had on her shoulders. "I am happy that you can see that in him." Her smile was radiant as she bowed again.

“Your son is quite brave. He has helped our village many times.”

“My son is quite stupid.” His sweet mother’s voice was quick. “But thank you.” She broke out of his grip and bowed.

Uchiha Ibikko slipped away.

They stood in the quiet hall. His mother is still facing the smaller woman. When she disappeared into the room, Obito spoke. “So, he gets the happy ending and you…?”

She turned and smiled at him, tears brimming in her green eyes. “I have you.” She enveloped him, making him feel warm and safe. Like when he was so small. “I’ll always have you. I’m so happy that you’re my son.”

Obito felt eyes and looked up to see Kakashi watching them curiously from the doorway.

He propped his chin on her head, watching Kakashi. “What happens now?” Kakashi silently moved as the door to the Uchiha’s room swung open. The two heads of villages walked out, followed by his team. The Kazekage walked towards them with purpose, his knowing smirk in place.

“We’ll take it one day at a time,” she whispered. “We’ve got time.”

Hatake Kakashi watched him as the Hokage passed him. Then, he gave Obito a nod before he fell in step with his Hokage as the moved towards the exit.

Obito smiled, pulling his mother in closer, “It’s never too late.”

III

When Obito returned home from the hospital, the little tattered Icha Icha book was sitting on his dresser, where his grandfather’s ANBU mask typically sat.

III

Sakura was a woman who had seen many, many things in her life. She had worked in the hospital for years and had seen all kinds of weird body parts and organs.

But the back of Sasuke’s neck as he knelt in front of her, bowing deeply, was something she never thought she’d see.

“I have been the most dishonorable. Please accept my apology despite my disgraceful behavior,”

“To you,” Ibiko prompted. He was silent. The petite woman put a hand on his slumped shoulder.

“To you,” Sakura’s eyes widened.

Ibiko smiled warmly, “And your,”

“And your family.” Sakura didn’t know what hurt more, those three words or when she punched him all those weeks ago.

The Uchiha matron let out a small cough. Sasuke physically shuddered. “I have disgraced my name sake and my ancestors.” The small woman’s hand came off his back and he stood. He looked her in the eye. She stood straighter. “Will you accept my apology?”

She wanted to punch him again. Through the chest. With something more solid than her fist. “No.” She said dispassionately. “But I’ll take your wife’s on your behalf. She’s quite the lyricist.” The woman bowed deeply. She helped her husband to his feet. He took a step away and looked down at the sand.

“Then we will have to try again.”

Gaara took a step towards them. “Leave my village.”

Sasuke turned on his heel. His wife bowed deeply. Their daughter looked between her two parents before giving a quick bow and running to grab her father’s hand.

Sakura’s lip curled as he pulled her tightly to him.

Naruto rushed Sakura, swooping her in a big hug. She couldn’t help but laugh. “Sasuke’s wife is going to work with the elders.” He whispered, “You’ll be able to come back to the village! Come see me soon, ya?” He said as he put her down. She watched over Naruto’s shoulder to see Sasuke glowering at them. She smiled brightly. “I’d love that.”

Naruto and Gaara took a few steps away to give their own farewells.

Sakura looked to where Kakashi and Obito stood away from everyone. The sand whirled around them, making it hard to see them, but Sakura could see Obito staring intently at Kakashi, eyes glossy,

nodding quickly. The sand kicked up into almost a tornado before the sand settled down.

Both Kakashi and Obito were adjusting their masks.

Obito pulled out a pair of sunglasses, sliding them into place as he moved to stand next to Gaara.

Kakashi slowly walked towards her. She forced herself to look at him as he approached. “Where’s your trusty book?” She said a little too awkwardly. Everything was a little too awkward. Far too awkward.

And it was her fault.

She hoped to fix that.

He scratched his masked cheek. “Oh, that wasn’t mine. I was just borrowing it.”

“Oh.” The silence between them was thick. “Listen, when I can come, I am coming back to Konoha, can I-”

“No.” Sakura was shaken at the finality of that one syllable. Her chest tightened slightly. It was understandable. Smiling, she shook her head. She opened her mouth to give her goodbyes when he spoke softly. “But if I’m passing through, I know where you live.” Her mouth dropped, gaping up at him. His hands were in his pockets as he looked around. “I kind of followed you home once.”

Her stomach dropped. “Kakashi-”

“And I plan on passing through a lot.” His gaze made her stand straighter. “Gaara and Naruto are setting up a joint mission program between Konoha and Suna.” He glanced over her shoulder. Even with his face half covered she knew he was smiling. “Long missions. Gaara has requested I be the first from the Konoha.”

“And when I’m here…” he rubbed the back of his neck, “Obito said the couch is much more comfortable than those hotel beds. The breakfast might not be the best, but they’re fine.”

She smiled brightly, flushing slightly. “That’s what I’ve heard…” She swallowed thickly, biting her lip, “And even if it’s between these missions.

“Or Obito isn’t home. Or me.” She did her best to open her heart,

“You’re always welcome. No matter what.”

Sakura almost jumped as Kakashi’s hand grasped hers. Tears welled in her eyes as he squeezed her hand.

“Goodbye, Sakura.” He whispered. He hesitated before moving away. She watched in one quick motion his hand dipping into the pouch on his hip and pulling out a green Icha Icha book. She watched his nose go behind the bind of the book as he walked towards Naruto.

“That was quite the show of public affection.” Obito’s voice gave away nothing of how he felt.

“I suppose it was.” She whispered. She felt Obito’s arms come around her shoulders.

Sakura felt her heart ease for the first time in eighteen years. She leaned heavily into Obito as they watched the group from Konoha disappear into the desert.

They stood staring out at the vast desert until they disappeared in the haze. “Let’s go.” The Kazekage spoke softly. Sakura nodded in agreement as they all turned and headed home.

Chapter End Notes

Is this story perfect? No.
Does it have gaping holes where plot was sprinkled and then nothing was resolved with it? Yes. This is why I don't release things serially anymore.
Was this fun? It was so fun. I had such a fun time with this story.

I asked someone once how they were able to read the embarrassing version of Fish's past, and they said 'the story at its core is great, despite the grammar issues'
And boy, oh boy, were there grammar issues.

I'd like to humbly apologize for that. 15 years of apologizes.

Again! Thank you all for coming on this journey! Tell me what you think! The good, the bad, the hopefully not so ugly anymore...I appreciate them all.

I might return to this world one day. I really wanted the change the ending (Besides removing the epilogue) but that's not what the assignment was.

Maybe I'll post the revised epilogue one day, but until then, you'll just have to use your imagination.

Hopefully my next big project will be posted in August. It's my last long fic.

IF YOU WANT TO DISCUSS THIS STORY MORE WRITE A COMMENT! HIT ME UP ON TUMBLR OR DISCORD. Goldfishlover73 wherever you look.

Hobey Ho! Let's go!

End Notes

ONE MORE THING!!

This story has been mass revised in June of 2024. If you see comments from before June 2024, please do not interact with them. I have had people in the past respond to comments that are years old and as much as I appreciate the support, in this story they might be referring to something different than what you're seeing.

I will love each and every comment and kudos this story receives and respect the wonderful, the fabulous and the not so great. Please do the same. I'm not one to delete comments, but I will moderate.

I'm also on Tumblr and Discord! Say hello if you want! I'll get back to you eventually!
goldfishlover73

Thank you

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!